

DIP-Styx

An introductory RPG for the 24 Hour RPG Project

Written by Timothy Dedeaux

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Premise/idea: one non-roleplayer who'd tried roleplaying and hadn't fallen in love with it told me the hardest part was character creation. Cross-referencing this in my mind with what I'd read years ago on the old Rec.Games.frp.Advocacy group about Design at Start vs. Develop in Play styles, I decided to write an RPG to emphasize the DIP side of things, and perhaps help new roleplayers get over the "character creation" hurdle. Develop in Play is abbreviated "DIP," and thus the "DIP" part of the name. The "Styx" part comes from the setting. For the record, this is designed for an at least somewhat experienced GM to use to introduce new players, not to be easy-access for a group of total newbies.

Setting:

For thousands of years, Charon guarded the entrance to the underworld, protecting us from the things that go bump in the night. But now, he's gone missing, and creatures are slowly breaking free, and it falls to ordinary people to stop them. Ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and strange spirits must be put to rest, and only you can do it: are you up to the task?.

The game begins with a group of relatively ordinary people (the player characters, perhaps with a few NPCs around for flavoring) finding themselves in a strange situation. They have to figure out what's going on and how to stop the creature. Ultimately, the game is a game of investigative horror, though the horror can be run anywhere from G-rated, funny cartoon monsters to Unrated disturbing *things*.

The characters may find themselves chasing ghosts through old, haunted mansions, seeking lost children in the dream world, chasing a vampire through the slums where he preys on prostitutes, Jack-the Ripper style, or hunting (and being hunted by) a werewolf on a country estate.

The adventure structure is:

- 1 Balance: Things seem normal, everything's cool
- 2 Unbalance: The unnatural intrudes, upsetting everything
- 3 Quest: The heroes seek to find out what's going on and how to overcome the creature
- 4 Resolution: The climactic moment when the heroes confront the beast and either win or lose
- 5 Wrap-Up: The situation is resolved, and a new balance is created, for good or ill.

Character Creation:

Character creation is simple: come up with a sentence describing who your character is, and another describing what he or she wants (some goal he/she has at the time. It's ok not to know the character's life's ambition yet). Oh yeah, a name helps, too.

For Example:

Jim Bones is an old straight-forward, down-home country doctor who doesn't suffer fools gladly. He feels protective of people in general, and seeks to stop (insert evil monster villain's name here). He's a widower, and he lost his son in Desert Storm, so he doesn't really feel like he has a lot to lose.

The GM will decide (usually with player input) the game's power level. Average people will start with 5 tokens, typical “hero” types will have 10 tokens, expert professionals will have 15, and super competent bad mother shut yo mouths will have 20.

Spending a Token increases one of a character's Traits by 1 Rank.

You can assign as many tokens as you want before play starts, except for your last Token. It must be saved so you can use it during play. You must spend at least 1 token and save at least 1 token, but you can spend as few or as many as you want within these limits.

For Example,

Jim's player assigns 3 of his 5 starting dice, 2 to Medicine (because he's a doctor), and 1 to Beside Manner (again, he's a country doctor and has to get along with his patients. Besides, he's been diagnosing people without high-tech equipment for decades. And he always calls it “diagnosing people,” not “diagnosing illnesses,” so he'll remember why he's really there).

Which gives Jim the following Traits:

Medicine (he's a doctor): 4 dice (2 Tokens),

Bedside Manner (Again, he's a country doctor): 3 dice (1 Token)

Using Tokens During the Game:

Any tokens not spent at character creation can be spent during play. When you use tokens, your character permanently gains +1 to the Trait in question per token spent. Your only requirement is that you come up with a sentence explaining why your character knows that skill.

For Example:

During the second session of the game, Jim gets into a nasty situation with some zombies, and notices a shotgun nearby. His player says “Jim grew up hunting: 2 tokens on Shooting.” That makes sense with Jim's background, and he now (permanently) has a “Shooting” rating of Good (4 dice).

Using a Token to Save Your Skin:

You can spend a Token to escape death or another seriously bad fate. Just narrate how your character gets out of it (try to be entertaining, but don't break the mood – don't be silly in a tense, scary game).

For Example:

Jim gets overwhelmed by the zombies when he runs out of ammo, and is about to be bitten. Not wanting his beloved character to turn into one of the walking dead, Jim's player says "1 Token to escape a fate worse than death. Jim stumbles back into the open window and falls onto the porch roof, then slides down and lands on the mulch pile, stinky but unhurt."

What the Trait and Skill Ratings Mean:

Horrible (0)	Bad (1)	Mediocre (2) – the default for anything not listed
Average (3)	Good (4)	Very Good (5)
Outstanding (6)	Legendary (7)	Superhuman (8+)

Defining Skills and Traits:

Skills and Traits should be medium-broad in their scope. For example, "Strong" is good, "Awesome at all things physical" is too broad, but "Excellent at left handed Schlager blade fencing" is too narrow.

The sample characters will hopefully give you some good ideas, but ultimately, you're gonna have to trust each other. Remember Rule One of gaming: Don't Be A Jerk (even if you think someone else is). Give your fellow players the benefit of the doubt, and don't get grabby.

Almost Counts (Sort Of):

Sometimes a character will have something that *might* apply or *almost* applies. In this case, use half the extra dice, rounded down. In other words, a "Good" sniper would roll 4 dice for rifles and long-range shooting, but would only get half the bonus (half of two equals 1, plus the default 2) or 3 dice for pistols and close-quarters gunslinging.

Sample Traits from the world of high school cliques:

"Queen Bee" would be good at inspiring a "fear of ostracism" based loyalty in her subordinates, a "desire for status" based desire for her among high school guys, and a "I can't stand you and I really can't stand that I'm jealous of you" loathing from the geeks and freaks.

"Hot Geek Girl" would be good for inspiring worship from the geeks and freaks, as well as showing up all the Queen Bees, Wanna-bees, and status worshipers.

"Gossip Queen" would be good for finding information and damaging people's reputations, without your victims even knowing you're behind it.

Some examples from the ever-popular world of firearms:

“Shooting” applies to any gun, but only for basic stuff like, well, shooting. It wouldn't apply to quick draw or automatic weapons fire or trick shots.

A “Gunslinger,” wouldn't get the full bonus for long-range shooting, but would get the bonus for trick shots and quick draws.

A “Machine gunner” wouldn't get the full bonus for pistols, or for trick shots and quick draws, but would be able to do impressive things with automatic weapons, like controlled bursts, spraying an area, and suppressive fire.

A “Sniper” wouldn't get the full bonus for pistols or quick draws, but could do trick shots (so long as they were doable with a steady rifle, and didn't involve twirling a pistol or such) and would also be able to conceal himself and shoot from concealment.

Experience and Advancement: At the end of each session, each character gets 1 extra token, so she/he'll have at least one to spend each session. You can add more dice to Traits and Skills you already have, you just can't do it more than once per session, or in the middle of a Contest.

Examples of Character Creation:

Jim Bones is an old straight-forward, down-home country doctor who doesn't suffer fools gladly. He feels protective of people in general, and seeks to stop (insert evil monster villain's name here). He's a widower, and he lost his son in Desert Storm, so he doesn't really feel like he has a lot to lose.

Medicine (he's a doctor): 4 dice (2 Tokens),

Bedside Manner (Again, he's a country doctor): 3 dice (1 Token)

Lisa Benny is a 13 year old cowboy-action shooting champion. She's definitely a country girl, and loves hunting, fishing, riding, and shooting. She wants to have a normal life, but not give up any of the things she loves.

Gunslinger (regional youth champion, to be specific): Very Good 5 (3 tokens)

Natalie Bradford is a "Queen Bee" of her high school, and she's only a freshman. She has the poise of a model and the mind of a social assassin. She's descended from *the* William Bradford, and has the old money to prove it. She wants to be recognized for the natural nobility she is.

Queen Bee (alpha female of a cutthroat high school clique): Very Good 5 (3 tokens)

Janey Brewer is a punk rock grrl who's never been afraid to speak her mind. She's not very well informed, mind you, but she's not afraid to speak her mind, loudly and with colorful language. She's also not intimidated by much of anything (she can be *intimidating*, but not *intimidated*). Janey loves leather pants, tattoos, piercings, cheap vodka, and the Sex Pistols.

Spunky Punker: Good 4 (2 Tokens)

Fellini Smith is a research geneticist and all-around geek girl. She loves fruit flies, double helixes, Punnett Squares, role playing games, espresso, and pale, scrawny guys. Fellini wore black for a month in memory of Gary Gygax.

She Blinded Me with SCIENCE! Good 4 (2 Tokens)

Mechanics and Systems:

Traits (also called Skills) are rated from 0 to 8 or more, with the default for anything not listed being Mediocre (2), and human maximum being Legendary (7).

What the Trait and Skill Ratings Mean:

Horrible (0)	Bad (1)	Mediocre (2) – the default for anything not listed
Average (3)	Good (4)	Very Good (5)
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Rolling the Dice:

When using a Trait/Skill, roll a number of dice equal to your character's rating in that Trait. Dice are 50-50 (Even = Success, Odd = Fail), so you can flip coins (Heads = Success, Tails = Fail) or use any size dice (so long as they have an even number of sides). The default for Traits (also known as Skills) that aren't listed is 2 dice, which represents just being "Mediocre."

Highly Technical Skills:

The GM can raise the difficulty or declare an automatic failure for unskilled uses of extremely technical skills, like brain surgery or spell casting.

Action Resolution (Simple Tests):

For simple tests, you roll a number of dice equal to your Trait, and try to get a number of successes equal to or greater than the difficulty.

Difficulty for Simple Tests:

Easy: 1 success required

Challenging: 2 successes required

Difficult: 3 successes required

Insane: 4 successes required

Conflict Resolution:

Conflicts between two characters are a bit more involved. First, they are broken up into "Rounds." In each Round, players declare what their characters are attempting, and what Trait they're using. Then each character rolls the appropriate Trait's dice and totals the successes.

1 success = opponent suffers a Basic Setback (-1 die penalty)

2 successes = enemy suffers a Major Setback (-2 dice penalty)

3 successes = enemy suffers an Extreme Setback (-3 dice penalty) and loses the conflict.

Any successes rolled by either character involved in the conflict apply to their opponent at the end of the Round. If nobody rolls any successes, the “Round” is a tie, and nobody accomplishes anything.

It's possible for neither character to suffer a setback, for one character to suffer a setback, or for both characters to suffer setbacks in the same “Round.”

The “Setback” applies to anything related to the Conflict, including future rounds of the Conflict. For example, if you lose a social Conflict, your Setback can represent being made to look foolish, being made to look guilty of something you didn't (or did) do, having your reputation tarnished, losing confidence, having your feelings hurt, etc. It will apply to any Social Test or Conflict until it “heals.” Setbacks typically “Heal” at the rate of 1 die per in-game day. This includes non-lethal wounds, like the kind you'd get from a fistfight or stun gun.

Lethal Wounds are another story. These apply to *every* category of action, and go away at the rate of 1 per *week* of game-time (and honestly, that's being generous. A month is more realistic). An “Extreme Setback” in lethal combat leaves the person dying, and in grave need of medical care.

Use only the *largest* Setback of it's type that a character has suffered: two “Basic Wounds” don't add up to a “Serious Wound,” but you could have a “Basic Wound” and a “Basic Social Setback,” each of which would apply separately to its own area.

Options and Tactics in Conflicts:

Players do have a few options beyond just rolling dice to see what happens.

Playing Defense: Since it's very easy for both characters to get badly hurt in a conflict (which makes sense: fights often end with both combatants wounded, and arguments often damage the credibility of both participants), players and their characters will *usually* (okay, virtually always) want to dedicate some of their dice to defense. These dice are rolled separately, and their total reduces your opponents Success Total, reducing the degree of Setback she achieves against you.

Combos and Setups: Instead of applying a Setback, which takes time to “heal,” you can instead choose to “Set Yourself Up” for an even better result next Round. This can be very useful when dealing with someone who's Playing Defense. If you do this, you get *double* the level of Setback as bonus dice for the NEXT Round of this Conflict (but only for the next Round – after that, it's gone).

Trick Shots: This gives you a -1 Die Penalty (unless you have a Trait/Skill that “covers” Trick Shots, like “Gunslinger”) to your Offensive Dice, but allows you to ignore 1 of your Opponent's Defense Successes. Examples of Trick Shots include “Calling” a shot to a zombie's head and “Staking” a vampire in the heart.

Special Rules (Mostly) for Physical Combat

First Aid for Lethal Wounds: The person attempting First Aid must roll a Simple Tests with a Medicine-related trait. The Test has a Difficulty equal to the level of the Setback (1 for a Wound, 2 for a Severe Wound, 3 for an Extreme Wound/near death). Success for the healer stabilizes the wound and saves the victim's life.

Drawing Weapons: If you have to draw the weapon, you don't get its bonus during the first “round” of combat, unless you have a Skill/Trait that covers “quick draw” (such as “Gunslinger,” “Duellist,” or “Iado master”).

Out of Range: If one character is too far away to affect the other (this usually happens in combat, but it could happen in a social environment, if someone starts spreading rumors while your character is out of town), the “out-ranged” character cannot cause a Setback to the other character, and has to Play Defense. The character can use excess “Defense” successes (above and beyond the number of successes they need to have to avoid suffering a Setback) to move closer. It takes 2 successes to move one “category” closer, and these can be “saved” from Round to Round. So some fool who brought a knife to a gunfight would need to move from “Medium Range” (the range for most guns) to “Short Range” (the range for hand to hand),

Caught Flat-Footed: -2 dice, first “round” only (taken by surprise, being verbally attacked by someone you thought was friendly, etc).

Bad “Ground”: -1 die, as long as it persists (enemy has the higher ground in combat, an unfriendly crowd, a hostile judge or jury). *Very* rarely will this be a -2 dice penalty.

Cover: -1 to -2 dice, depending on how much of the opponent the cover protects, and how solid the protection is (enemy literally has something to hide behind in combat, opponent has someone watching his back/covering for him in a social or legal contest, etc).

Car Chases: Car chases are handled as normal Conflicts between the Driving Skills of the drivers, modified by the Speed bonuses of the vehicles. Setbacks don't represent vehicle damage, but position (catching up or getting away). Inflicting an Extreme Setback means you've either forced the fleeing car off the road (thus catching its passengers and driver) or escaped your pursuer.

Ramming and Demolition Derbies: Sometimes, you just want to tear the other guy's car to pieces. For this, use the Drive Skills of the drivers modified by the Toughness ratings of the vehicles. Any Setbacks apply as “Wounds” to the vehicle, and an “Extreme Setback” wrecks the vehicle.

GM's Section:

Creating NPCs:

Do it just like PCs. A couple of sentences and a number of tokens, which can be spent in advance or in play. Just be sure not to let your NPCs overshadow the PCs. Remember, the PCs are supposed to do everything important. NPCs are opposition, supporting cast, color, etc.

Running Investigative Adventures:

Mysteries can be tricky, if you're not used to doing them.

One approach that can work well is to figure out what clues are absolutely necessary to move the adventure forward, then give those to the characters when they reach the right point, *without needing die rolls*. (the “Gumshoe” approach, after the RPG by Robin Laws that pioneered it).

Make sure there are “extra” clues that will help the PCs have an easier time of things. You can require rolls for those, of course, but *don't let the game stall out because of a bad roll*.

You will need to plan the game a lot more in a mystery game than in other types, but understand that the PCs will probably take things out of order, skip around, skip entire sections, and not follow your script at all. It's better to plan out what happened, who dunnit, what will introduce the characters, and who has what evidence, and let them approach it from whatever angle and in whatever order they want.

Also, if your players are misinterpreting the clues you give them, you have some choices:

- 1 Give them some more clues or have something happen that puts them back on track.
- 2 Change the pre-planned story to fit their current assumptions.
- 3 Let them fail, but try to make it as interesting as possible

Some groups will prefer a “good story” ending regardless, and you'll need to put them back on track if they get too far off. Some groups prefer the challenge, and feel like it's rigged or “fake” if there is not chance of failing to solve the mystery. It's best to find out which way your gaming group feels before running an investigative adventure.

Investigative Adventure Seeds:

The Waldorf-Hysteria Hotel:

Staying in an old hotel, the guests start seeing strange things – letters written on the walls in blood, warnings scrawled in the cracks of broken mirrors. Then, one of the guests is killed inside a locked room. The police rule it suicide, but the PCs know better . . . there's a ghost involved.

Possible Twist: the ghost isn't the killer, but is one of the killer's victims, who can't rest until the killer is stopped.

Thicker than Water:

The PCs all know each other through a homeless shelter or soup kitchen. They begin to notice that some of the homeless people have gone missing, and the others don't want to talk about it. They also notice that some of the homeless people have anemia, and seem sort of spaced out and pale. Looks like a vampire to me.

Possible Twist: The vampire isn't the killer, but is trying to track down the killer, who could be mortal, a werewolf, another vampire, or even something different. But don't let the NPC vampire do all the work. It should still be up to the PCs to stop this thing.

Hunter's Moon:

The PCs are staying at a country manor (or deer camp). When one of the NPCs goes missing, they find him the next day, torn to pieces. They go out in full force, loaded for bear, but another NPC is killed and dragged away. They've got three days of “full moon” to catch this werewolf and figure out how to kill it.

Possible Twist: it's not a simple silver-bullet werewolf, but a skin walker, and the way to kill it is find its skin and destroy that. OR, it's one of the PC's, and he just doesn't know it yet (better for a one-off), or one of the major NPCs.

Rawhead and Bloody Bones:

Children have been disappearing from a suburban neighborhood lately. While the parents and cops are looking for a kidnapper, the PCs notice something strange that leads them to believe the kids have been taken by the evil Fae spirit, “Rawhead and Bloody Bones,” who drags bad children underwater (in modern homes, that means into the pool or even down through the pipes) and eats them.

Possible Twist: it really IS a kidnapper, and “Rawhead” is only after *truly* bad children, like little serial killers-to-be who torture animals, set fires, and summon evil spirits (hey, it actually *works* now that Charon's gone), not kids who don't clean their rooms. “What do you think I am, some kind of monster?”

Survival Adventures:

These are somewhat easier to run. Put the characters in a closed system where they can't just leave, throw something hideous at them, and see how many survive.

You can often combine this with the Investigative style, by providing some method to end the assault, provided the PCs can find it. The investigation might be secondary, in which case it will just make the surviving easier, or it may be the only way to stop the flood of monsters (at which point, the GM should see the advice for Investigative style games, above).

In one-offs, there is no need to give the PCs a sure “out,” and killing most or all of them can be entertaining for all involved. Don't do this with established characters the players have grown attached to, unless you've talked to them and they want to end the game in a (potential) total party kill. Again, Rule One of Gaming: Don't Be a Jerk.

Survival Adventure Seeds:

Shop Until You Drop:

We've all seen *Dawn of the Dead*, so why not get the chance to live it? Zombies in a mall – better than snakes on a plane!

Welcome to Transylvania, Muhahahahaha!

You knew you shouldn't have accepted that all-expenses-paid trip to a “scenic castle in the Wallachia region of Romania.” What a pain in the neck! Now the PCs are trapped in a vampire's castle!

Mummy Dearest:

They said archeology wouldn't be like *Indiana Jones*. They didn't mention that it would be more like *The Mummy*! (This one takes place on an archaeological dig in Egypt, of course).

Alternately: Sneak into the museum, you said, we can make out in the treasures of Egypt exhibit, you said . . . now the treasures of Egypt are trying kill us!

Appendix: Things That Go Bump in the Night

The thing to keep in mind here is that each creature should have a specific way of killing it that the PCs should have to find out in the course of the game.

This can be as easy as “hmm, the moaning, shambling, smelling guys aren't falling when we shoot them in the chest, so let's shoot them in the head,” or as complicated as a specific ritual that must be done at a specific time to counteract the summoning ritual that brought forth the great Cow-Thulhu, whose udder-tentacles will make cud of your *souls*! (I'm milking this for all it's worth – can you tell?)

That said, here are a couple of examples:

Typical “Romero” Zombies:

Fighting 3 (for shambling, slow zombies), 4 (for crazy, running zombies)

Suffer NO Setbacks except from “Trick Shots” to the head, fire, or explosions

(You can use Combos and Setups against them)

Attempt to Combo (grab) then Attack (bite). The bite is lethal damage.

If the zombies are contagious, it's the bite that passes the “virus” along.

Hollywood Vampires:

Fighting 5

Suffer NO Setbacks except from “Trick Shots” to the head, fire, holy water or explosions

A wooden stake to the heart kills them instantly (that's a Trick Shot that causes ANY Setback).

Can do lethal damage with their bare hands

Burn in sunlight, but can see in the dark

Can be held back with crosses, etc.

Traditional Vampires

Fighting 5 Senses 5 Charm 5 Sneak 5

Suffer NO Setbacks except from “Trick Shots” to the head or heart, fire, holy water or explosions

Can do lethal damage with their bare hands

Cannot use their abilities in sunlight, need to spend most of their days sleeping, can see in the dark

Can be held back with crosses, etc.

(Sometimes they have powers, like controlling animals or people)

Appendix: Gear:

Gear adds or subtracts dice from your rating.

General Gear:

Inferior or Lacking Gear: -1 (bandaging a wound with strips of a t-shirt, picking a lock with a hairpin)

Average Gear: +0 (a first aid kit or basic lockpicks)

Good Gear: +1 (paramedic or doctor's bag, field surgeon's kit, professional locksmith's bag, etc)

Superb Gear: +2 (an ambulance or E.R., the best lockpicks known to man)

Weapons:

Small: +0 (knife, small bore pistol, .22 rifle) These allow lethal wounds and attacking from a distance

Medium: +1 (sword, pistol, carbine)

Large: +2 (pole ax, rifle, shotgun)

Massive: +3 (boulder, grenade, .50 BMG)

Weapon dice can apply toward Attack OR toward Defense (parrying, cover fire, etc).

Weapon Range:

Thrown and Melee weapons are "Short Range."

Bows and Guns are "Medium Range"

Full-Power Rifles (Deer and Sniper Rifles) are "Long Range"

Armor:

Light: +1 (leather)

Medium: +2 (chainmail, breastplate, kevlar "bulletproof" vest)

Heavy: +3 (full plate, anti-rifle armor)

Armor Dice always and only apply toward Defense.

Guns ignore non-bulletproof/medieval style armor.

Vehicles:

Motorcycle: Speed +3, Toughness -1, Gets +1 Speed Die in close spaces, alleys, etc.

Dirt Bike/ATV: Speed +1, Toughness +0, Gets +2 Speed Dice off-road *and* +1 in close spaces

Sports Car: Speed +3, Toughness +1, Gets +1 Speed Die on straightaways and open roads

Family Sedan: Speed +1, Toughness +1

Big-Engined Luxury Sedan: Speed +2, Toughness +2

SUV or Pickup Truck: Speed +1, Toughness +2

Heavy Duty 4x4 SUV or Pickup: Speed +1, Toughness +3, Gets +2 Speed Dice off-road

Delivery Van/Short Bus: Speed +0, Toughness +4

Full Sized Bus: Speed -1, Toughness +5