



The Dark Wood

A Role-Playing Game of Pain and Redemption

Table of Contents

3	.....	Introduction
4	.....	Character Creation
12	.....	Game Play
14	.....	Infernal Conflicts
20	.....	Earthly Conflicts
22	.....	Sin and Virtue Checks
23	.....	Redemption
26	.....	Glossary and Design Notes
27	.....	Character Sheet
28	.....	Acknowledgments

The Dark Wood

(cc) 2005 Marc Majcher, Gizmet Gameworks

The Dark Wood was produced as a part of the October 2005 Ronnies, a 24-hour RPG challenge sponsored by Ron Edwards on the Forge. This game is built around the terms “Pain” (in reference to the worldly pain experienced by the characters, which drives them to their sad fate at the beginning of play), and “Sphere” (referring to the Heavenly Spheres which represent the redeemed characters' ultimate goal). For more information, please see:

<http://www.indie-rpgs.com/forum/>
<http://www.24hourrpg.com/>

Many invaluable resources on the IntarWeb were used in the production of this game, and these are only a few – the rest are lost somewhere in my browser history, but you all hold a special place in my cockles.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/16187/>
http://www.wolfram.demon.co.uk/rp_dante_hell.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Divine_Comedy

This game is released under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Sharealike license. You are free to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work, and make derivative works under the following conditions: You must attribute the work to the original author, as above. You may not use this work for commercial purposes. If you alter, transform, or build upon the work, you may distribute the resulting work only under an identical license to this one. For more information, go to:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/>

The Dark Wood is intended to be used for entertainment purposes only, and is not intended as an endorsement or affirmation of any particular religion, moral code, or mythology of a hereafter. Do not try this at home. There are no second chances in real life. No immortal souls were harmed in the production of this game.

Introduction

THOSE WHO WERE VIOLENT AGAINST THEMSELVES ARE ETERNALLY DESTROYED BY HARPIES IN THE WOOD OF THE SUICIDES, A DARK, DEATHLY FOREST OF TANGLED TREES WITH BLACK LEAVES. THE SOULS OF THE SUICIDES ARE ENCASED IN THORNY TREES THAT ARE CONSTANTLY TORN AT BY THE ODIUS HARPIES, THE OVERSEERS OF THESE DAMNED. WHEN THE HARPIES FEED UPON THEM, DAMAGING THEIR LEAVES AND LIMBS, THE WOUNDS BLEED. ONLY AS LONG AS THE BLOOD FLOWS ARE THE SOULS OF THE TREES ABLE TO SPEAK. THUS, THEY WHO DESTROYED THEIR OWN BODIES ARE DENIED HUMAN FORM; AND JUST AS THE SUPREME EXPRESSION OF THEIR LIVES WAS SELF DESTRUCTION, SO THEY ARE PERMITTED TO SPEAK ONLY THROUGH THAT WHICH TEARS AND DESTROYS THEM. ONLY THROUGH THEIR OWN BLOOD DO THEY FIND VOICE.

-- TONY JONES, ON DANTE'S SEVENTH CIRCLE OF HELL, RING II

The Dark Wood is a role-playing game about worldly pain, the consequences that may follow, and redemption after it seems that all hope is lost. The players play the part of the souls of people who have committed suicide, and have therefore been condemned to Hell, their souls inhabiting a black, thorny tree on the banks of the River Phlegethon, their bodies hanging from their barren limbs. All hope is not lost, however. As the trees are wounded by the Harpies as part of their torment, they are granted the ability to speak, and tell the stories of how they came to take their own lives, and land themselves in such a lamentable situation. Although it is not often mentioned (for obvious reasons), this infernal torture is not always eternal – some fortunate souls may, through introspection and atonement, cast off their worldly sins, and ascend to one of the Heavenly Spheres, to bask in the presence of God for the rest of eternity.

This task is not easy as one might imagine at the outset. The chance at salvation carries with it certain responsibilities and risks. Firstly, no soul may attempt to redeem itself alone – when they are ready, a set number of damned souls are chosen, and given the opportunity to purge themselves of their Woe, and of the sins that brought about their fall. These souls are bound to one another, and may not leave the company of their fellow aspirants, lest they bring about the damnation of them all. Additionally, salvation is not assured. It is possible that this clutch of souls may fail at their task, and condemn one or more of their company to return to their punishment as a wounded

tree for some indeterminate period of time – perhaps they will receive another opportunity to save themselves from eternal torment, perhaps this was their last hope, and they will never see grace again.

Character Creation

The Characters in The Dark Wood are all unique, and at the same time ordinary – each one has their own tale of who they were while they were alive, the everyday things they did to mark the days, places they traveled, people they loved and hated, and at the end, what series of unfortunate events provoked them to take their own lives. Ultimately, this game is about personal pain, what causes it, how individuals deal with their own pain, and how they can free themselves from it. Over the course of one or more sessions of The Dark Wood, they will recount and relive the traumatic incidents and environments that chipped away at their will to live, and hopefully learn to leave behind the pain that they caused, becoming more and more virtuous and worthy of salvation along the way.

Before you can play, you will need to gather a few things:

- Several people willing to go through Hell with you. The Dark Wood was designed with four players in mind, but it should work just as well with one or two fewer or extra.
- A number of stones, coins, chips, or other small markers for each player, and a bowl or something with which to hold them.
- A character sheet, or a sheet of paper to record each character's background, tale of Woe, Sins, and Virtues.
- A few regular six-sided dice (d6).

To begin, each player is assigned an equal number of tokens, representing their character's Woe. How many they are assigned depends on how many players you have, and how long you'd like the game to last. If you want a game that takes an evening or two to play through, and have four players, four Woe markers seems to be a fair amount. If you have less players, or want the game to go on longer, you can give each player more tokens; likewise, if you wind up with more players that will each take their turn working through their pain, or wish to play a shorter version of the

game, assign fewer tokens to each player. In any case, a player should probably never start with less than two Woe markers.

To create the condemned and damned characters, the players will be telling stories, one for each of their characters. Unlike many other role-playing games, a player is not in complete control of the creation of their character. Each player takes part in telling the story of who a character used to be, how they lived their life, and what happened to them before they wound up in Hell. Naturally, this requires quite a bit of trust and cooperation from the players – particularly because there is no assigned “Game Master” in *The Dark Wood*. Every player is responsible for helping the others craft and recount a compelling and entertaining narrative describing their fall from grace, and their struggle for redemption.

Once everyone understands the nature of the game, and has settled in to begin play, each player should write down the name of their character on the top of their character sheet, along with a brief description of whatever their occupation or avocation was in life. Since the time span of the game is ephemeral and infinite, characters may be from any period in history (past, present, or even future), and from anywhere in the world. However, the players should be aware that unless they are very specific about who their characters are, they may be surprised as to who they wind up being, and where and when they wind up being from!

When all the players have finished writing down their characters' initial details, the first person to finish (or a random player, if you prefer) begins their story.

“My name is _____, and in life, I was a _____.”

In this step, and in every other, the player telling their part of the story must use the exact words written here, filling in the blank spots with the appropriate details. For this first line, players should obviously fill in the name and occupation that they've already written down – they may not be changed once the storytelling has begun.

After the player has said their line, and after each line following, there are two ways to proceed. The player who has just spoken will then silently point to another player to continue the telling. Any player may be chosen to speak the next line of the story, but no player may be chosen twice until all other players have had their chance to speak a line. Alternately, the player to the left of the one who has just spoken will continue – this may make the initial storytelling go a little more smoothly, but removes some of the element of spontaneity that arises from not knowing if you'll be called upon to move the story forward.

As soon as the next storyteller has been designated, they must immediately deliver the next line of the character's biography:

“There was nothing that I loved more than _____.”

As each line of the story is spoken, the player who owns the character should note down each new element of their character's history. Accordingly, the player who is filling in the details should strive to make their additions strong and concise, so they are easy to record. It is not necessary to record every single word that is said verbatim, but the essence of the story should be captured, and the other players have the right to intercede if they feel that the spirit of the original description was not preserved in the transcription. If the player who is writing down the character's story feels that they aren't able to faithfully transcribe the spoken line before the next speaker is chosen, they may hold up their hand to call for a moment to finish writing, or, if they think they can remember the important bits, they may wait until after the full story is told to write everything down.

A special note: During the telling of a character's tale, there may be brief pauses while certain game-related actions are performed (which will be described momentarily). These pauses should occur before the next storyteller is chosen, not afterward. The reason for this is that the events that shape a character's life should be as honest and unrehearsed as possible, and the speaker's lines should be delivered immediately after being pointed to, without taking a moment to think about what the “right” or “good” thing to say would be. It is expected that a player may stumble and stammer a bit until they get the hang of things, but they really should be encouraged to say the first thing that springs to mind – simple and obvious is always better than complex, profound or clever. If for some reason a player simply cannot bring themselves to drag the words from their mouth, they may pass their turn by taking one additional Woe marker from the central stash, and either point to another player to say their line for them, or pass it to the player on their left.

After the second line is delivered and recorded, the next chosen player speaks:

“Every day, I would _____.”

Remember to keep it short and simple, and then point to the next narrator, who is responsible for adding the first element of drama into the character's story:

“But one day, _____.”

Beginning with this line, the storytellers begin to insert complications into the character's previously mundane and comfortable life. This first obstacle should not be malicious, necessarily, but it should introduce a serious departure from their ordinary established routine. If they drive to work every day, maybe they come across an accident, or have one themselves. If they've become accustomed to seeing their kids every other weekend, perhaps they aren't able to for some reason. This initial development should not be extraordinarily drastic (although it may be), but should be considered as the falling stone that begins an avalanche. Things will only go downhill from here. The next narrator is chosen, and continues:

“And because of that, _____.”

The player that speaks this line should build upon the scenario that is set up by the complication that was just described. They may worsen things by using the introduced complication to trigger another event, or they may simply amplify its effects. This is also the first opportunity for players to use their Woe markers. Each of these tokens represents a knot of regret or tragedy that a character must work through or resolve in some way before they are able to free themselves from their Hellish fate, and join the rest of the righteous in one of the Heavenly Spheres.

If, after hearing this part of the character's history, any player (except the player that is speaking the line) feels that this development warrants an additional emotional or spiritual burden for the character – and it very well may not at this point – they may try to give the player whose character is being narrated one (and only one) of Woe marker from the central pool. At any point during the development of a life story, if only one token is offered to the player in question, the player may refuse to accept it on the grounds that the event is not sufficiently tragic. Any other player may then add an additional Woe marker to cement the offer, which must then be accepted. (Remember, the purpose of distributing these tokens is not simply to “screw your buddy” – no player may ascend to Heaven until all of the players' characters' Woe has been eliminated – but to provide a concrete measure of the tragedy of each individual story.) Whether or not any tokens are given to the active character's player, the next narrator is chosen, and speaks:

“To make matters worse, _____.”

This is where things really start to go wrong for our poor soul. The knife was already in – now it is being twisted. If it's bad enough, the players may attempt to assign the player one more Woe marker, although they still may feel that things aren't too terrible yet – and they'll be right. The next narrator tells why, simply, with:

“Eventually, _____.”

That's it. That did it. That was just about the worst thing that could happen to a person, and nobody could deny that what happened next was anything but inevitable. The character is now at the end of their rope, and sees only one way out, one way to escape the pain that this unfortunate series of events has brought them. One more Woe marker may be given to the player of this unlucky soul, before another narrator is chosen to describe their exit from the mortal world:

“Finally, I couldn't take it any longer, and I _____.”

And with that, the character's fate is sealed. After seeing what no person should see, after living through unbearable heartbreak, after being forced to do the one thing they swore they'd never do, the afflicted individual breaks down and commits suicide in an attempt to escape the horrible agony that was once their life. It doesn't have to be anything dramatic, but it should be simple and sad as it is unavoidable. No Woe is assigned after this line – this is the crime that brings all other sorrows upon the character. If the story so far has been harrowing enough, pause for a moment before choosing the last narrator, who will briefly describe the aftermath of this act of desperation:

“And ever since then, _____.”

You may wish to speak of the people who were left behind, or of the responsibilities left unfulfilled or opportunities never to be taken; words that will never be able to be said, promises that will never be kept. Perhaps there was an injustice that only the suicidal character could have avenged, or a malefactor that will never be unmasked, free to go on victimizing other unfortunates. Whatever the postscript to the character's short life may be, those last fleeting images mark the end of their memory of the mortal world. The players may take this final opportunity to assign another point (or two, if they refuse, and fail) of Woe to the storytold character. and then, the tale of their time on Earth is done, and once it has been successfully recorded by the responsible player, the next story may begin. Start with the last untold player who spoke, or the next player to the right of the first one, and begin the storytelling process once again with “My name is...”

Continue telling stories, describing the suffering, sadness, and eventual downfall of each despondent character, until everyone has a complete account of their character's anguish and demise. Each player should now have several things; firstly, they will have a pile of stones or coins in front of them, representing their character's Woe. Take this opportunity to take them in your hand and feel their weight. This is the weight of your despair, and it is what you must rid yourself of before you may join the other souls in Heaven. If, after all the tales are told, you find yourself without any Woe markers, don't worry – there's plenty to go around. Draw a few new tokens from the bowl (or whatever), back up to the number that you started with.

Next, you will have on your character sheet a list of the tragedies that have befallen your character. Now is the time to examine your character's life, and pinpoint the moments that lead to the fateful decision to end your life by your own hand. If your storytellers did their jobs properly, you should have a whole pile of juicy emotional trauma, poor decisions, and plain old misfortune to dig through. Take note of the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and final lines of your character's story – these are special, and will be used to create the main stories in the game.

Line 4: “But one day...”	(The Taint)
Line 5: “And because of that...”	(The Consequence)
Line 6: “To make matters worse...”	(The Descent)
Line 7: “Eventually...”	(The Last Straw)
Line 9: “Ever since then...”	(The Regret)

These will be referred to as your five “Woe” lines – mark them out as the specific incidents that you must work through during play. You will develop each one of these into a scene that will be played out by you and the other players, during which you will hopefully resolve whatever misfortune or misjudgment turned them against themselves.

You will also have a few other lines in your character's story that you may use to describe three Traits for your character. Who they were, what they did, and how they ended their life each allow you to define one Trait that your player may use to help them prevail in the conflicts to come.

Line 1: “...in life, I was a...”	(The Occupation)
Line 2: “Every day, I would...”	(The Routine)
Line 7: “Finally, I couldn't take it any longer, and I...”	(The Suicide)



Lastly, there will be three tracks on your character sheet, denoting your character's level of Sin and Virtue. Each of the three tracks represent one pair of opposing attributes, and where your character stands on each of them. The three pairs are Hope and Despair, Love and Hatred, and Faith and Apostasy. On a numerical scale, the Virtues are represented by positive numbers, and the Sins are represented by negative numbers; take special note that there is no “zero” point on the tracks. You are either fallen, or in a state of grace – there is no in between.

At the outset of the game, your character is in a bad way. Choose one of the tracks, and place a token at negative two, on the side of one of the Sins. (If you are not using a character sheet, and are just keeping track of your character on a normal piece of paper, just note your initial scores, and then cross out and rewrite them as they go up and down.) Choose another one of the pairs and mark a spot on the side of a different Sin, this time at negative three. These two scores partially indicate the issues that your character must work out – maybe they're still furious at the lover that jilted them, sending them into a downward spiral of depression; perhaps they're simply furious at God, and have just thrown their Faith out the window. Either way, they

still have one redeeming quality, one thing that most other condemned sinners do not possess, that causes them to be singled out, and given a chance to redeem themselves. Place a token on the Virtue side of the remaining track, at positive one, to denote the area in which you have one last spark of hope.

Example

Here's how an example of character creation might go. Adam, Beth, Charlie, and Dana get together at Charlie's house for an evening of soul-saving, and sit down to begin telling the stories of their damned characters. Charlie has a bunch of glass stones (taken from his Zendo game), which he places in a shallow wooden bowl in the center of the table, and passes out copies of the character sheet to the players. Each of them take four stones, and start filling out the top section of their sheet, making up a name and occupation for their characters. Adam, predictably enough, finishes first, and waits for the others before beginning his tale of Woe. "My name is Antonio, and I was a sculptor in 15th century Florence." He then points to Charlie, sitting across from him, who continues the story. "There was nothing that I loved more than the sound of my chisel striking stone." Simple and obvious. Adam writes this down on his character sheet, and Charlie points to Dana, who continues, "Every day, I would busy myself in my studio, making fine works of art." Dana points to Beth, who is the only player that hasn't had a turn speaking this time around. Beth introduces the first bit of conflict: "But one day, one of my wealthy patrons said that he wanted me to work for him alone, and that he would pay me well." That doesn't sound so bad, so nobody thinks to offer a Woe marker to Adam.

Anyone may continue with the next line, so Beth sends the line back to Dana, who escalates the trouble. "And because of that, I was unable to spend any time on a personal project, my greatest work, my masterpiece." Beth thinks that sounds pretty bad, being a thoughtful artistic sort, and attempts to give Adam one of the Woe markers from the bowl, but Adam refuses, and nobody else backs up her offer, so it is withdrawn, and she points to Adam to continue his story. "To make matters worse, I was unable to spend any time with my favorite model, Portia, whom I had grown to love." Beth doesn't like the sound of this development, either, so she takes a Woe marker from the bowl, and offers it to Adam once again. Adam refuses this one as well, but Dana takes a second token from the bowl and adds it to Beth's, making an offer that Adam can not, as they say, refuse. He takes the two Woe markers and adds them to his personal pile.

After the stones are sorted out, and this portion of Antonio's story has been recorded, Adam chooses Charlie to narrate the penultimate chapter of his character's life. "Eventually, I learned that Portia tired of my inattention, and moved to Venice, where she married another artisan, a painter." Well, everyone agrees that would be a blow to any man's heart, and Dana gives one of the communal Woe

markers to Adam, which he graciously accepts. Charlie then points to Beth, the last player available, to tell the group about poor Antonio's fall. She begins to speak, but no words come, so she shakes her head, draws a Woe marker from the bowl, and passes her turn to Dana "Finally, I couldn't take it any longer, and I hung myself from the scaffolding in my new master's studio." Whoa. Adam records Antonio's fateful end on his character sheet, and then looks to Dana to choose the final storyteller, and she points back at him. Adam finishes, "And ever since then, each night, Portia cries herself to sleep, unable to bear the gaze of the unfinished statue of herself."

And that is the end of Antonio's tragic life story – but it is only the beginning of his journey of redemption. But before that can begin, the players turn to Beth, who looks down at her character sheet and begins, "My name is Maria, and I was a teenage girl living in Kansas City..."

Game Play

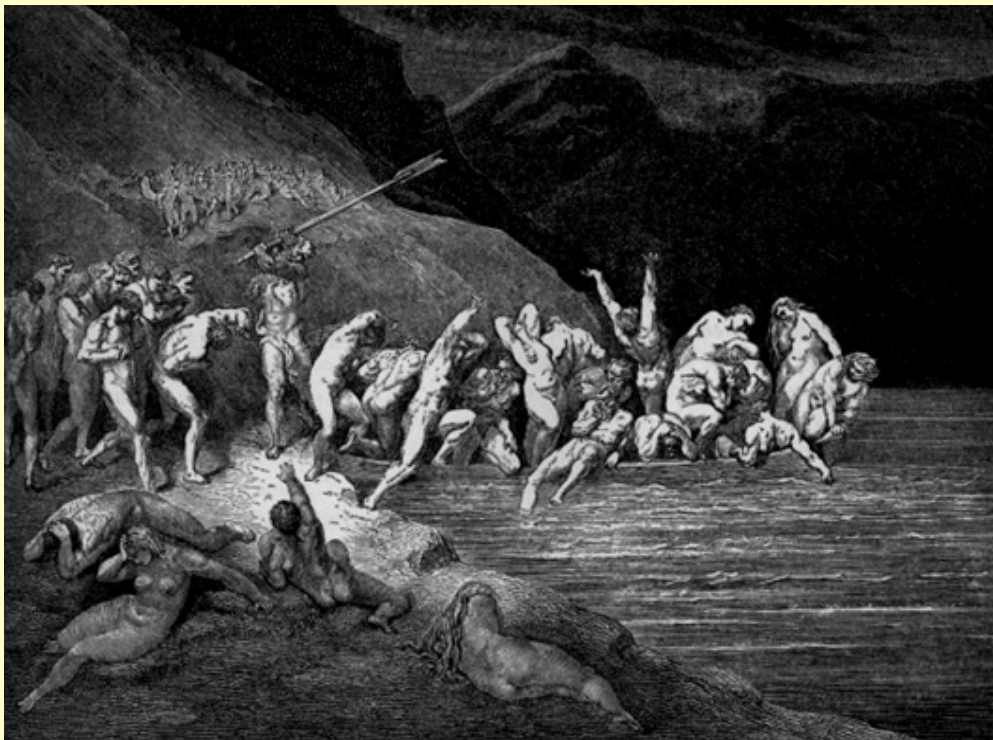
Now that you have created a cadre of souls who have been condemned to torment in Hell for their sins against Creation, and themselves, it is time to give the sorry souls an opportunity to redeem themselves, and rise up once again.

To begin, the player with the lowest starting number of Woe markers (if more than one player has the lowest number, choose one of them at random) may narrate a brief scene, set in the Dark Wood of the Suicides, in the Seventh Circle of Hell. (As the game progresses, play runs counter-clockwise, passing to the next player on the narrator's right.) Maybe an actual angelic messenger descends into the depths of the Pit, batting away the tormenting Harpies with a flaming sword as they deliver their message of hope. Perhaps it is just a soft whisper carried on the winds that blow the players' blackened limbs to and fro. Any way you'd like to start things off, the upshot of the scene should be that the players have been Watched, Noticed, and Chosen to receive a chance to purge their sins, and take their rightful place in one of the Heavenly Spheres. The characters' spirits are freed, and their souls are bound together – they still do not exist as corporeal beings, but nevertheless, none of them may leave the "sight" of any of the others. Now begins their progress down the long road of tribulation and atonement.

Game play is divided into a series of conflicts, each of which is a brief story told by one of the players. The characters' ultimate goal is to bring resolution to all the issues created during the five most traumatic episodes of their life stories, as stated

during character creation. (“But one day...”, “And because of that...”, “To make matters worse...”, “Eventually...”, and “Ever since then...”.) They must also cleanse themselves of Woe, and raise themselves up out of Sinfulness, embracing all three of the primary Virtues. To achieve this, the players must create short scenes in which they demonstrate their Hope, Love, or Faith, or in which they confront and resolve the incidents in their lives that drove them to suicide. Any player may begin a conflict scenario by describing a scene, stating what their character's objective for the scene is, and what the stakes are should they fail or succeed. Another player will play their Infernal opposition, and attempt to drive them back into the darkness.

At the outset, the characters' souls are still confined to the Circle of Hell that they began in – the Seventh Circle, which contains the damned Violent souls, including malicious tyrants, unrepentant murderers and plunderers, slave traders, wastrels, blasphemers, usurers, and sodomites. This circle lies below the city of Dis, where heretics of all stripes receive their eternal punishment, and is encircled by and infused with the waters from the River Phlegethon, full of flames and boiling blood. It is tended by all manner of abominations, from the Harpies that torment the denizens of the Dark wood, to the Minotaur, Centaurs, and wild dogs that watch over and wreak savage pain upon the souls of the wicked that reside within. The players' characters are ordinary men and women, and further, they are cast helpless to their new task, covered only by a thin white gown. They have no tools or weapons, and even if they did, they would be no match for any of these fiends if they attempted to engage them in any manner of combat.



So, the players must begin their journey by wandering through Hell, seeking out other souls who, like themselves, have been condemned to eternal damnation, but still exhibit a glimmer of hope, just an inkling that, given the right opportunity, they may redeem themselves. As they travel through the underworld, they will encounter such beings, and it is through their interactions with these misunderstood creatures that they will prove themselves worthy enough to undertake their true purpose – to face their past, and exorcise the demons that bind them to this unholy plane.

Infernal Conflicts

So, one player must begin the game play by narrating an Infernal Conflict. This will be some kind of interaction with a damned person or creature in Hell, in which one of the characters must use an appeal to Virtue in order to confer some degree of salvation upon the pitiful soul. The player tells a story, describing what they are doing and where they are when they come across this wretched thing. It may be another of the Suicides, as yet unsaved, or the band of lost souls may venture further apace, attempting to bargain with or soothe the temper of one of the rampaging Violent condemned who rage across the landscape. Remember that the player characters must stick together on their journey, so any player should feel free to interject or make a suggestion about how to improve upon the current scenario. Once the scene is set, the player must narrate a conflict between themselves and whatever they have encountered. Does the spirit wish to be left to its laments and not be bothered, or does one of the blasphemers resent the character's message of Hope, and attempt to strike back at them in anger?

With the basic situation is laid out, the narrator must now state the dramatic stakes they wish to place upon the encounter. To do this, they must describe a positive outcome – the one that they desire to happen – and a negative outcome, which they wish to avoid if at all possible. Remember, the characters are powerless, physically, so the stakes must be spiritual or emotional. So, perhaps the stake in the case of the blasphemer above would be, “Will this poor soul listen to my entreaty, so they can recognize and begin to atone for their Sins?” If the player succeeds, the blasphemer starts to see the true error of their ways, and promises to aspire to Virtue again. If they fail, perhaps the blasphemer will become enraged, driving the characters away with a freezing black wind of curses and epithets. Once the stakes are set, the opposition may begin their dastardly work. The player to the narrator's immediate left will play the part of Il Piccolo Diavolo – The Little Devil, who traditionally perches upon the shoulder of good men, whispering their encouragement towards wicked acts.

Now the Little Devil determines the Degree of this Infernal Conflict. They choose a number that represents the difficulty of the task that the crusading character has set for themselves. A simple task (which is what the players should be attempting at the beginning of the game) such as listening to and consoling a despondent soul may only rate a Difficulty of one or two. Confronting a condemned murderer, and offering them your Love could be a good deal trickier, and may have a Difficulty of five or six. Attempting to bargain with one of the Infernal Beasts for the release of one of the wicked souls under their care could warrant a Difficulty of nine or higher.

In any case, the difficulty should reflect not only how hard the task at hand might be, but it should also provide a suitable challenge for the character whose player chooses the stakes. It might be quite simple for a Virtuous soul on the cusp of Ascension to do one final good deed by offering a cup of cool water to one of the sodomites buried upside-down in the Plain of Burning Sand, but surely they can think of a more interesting and risky act, with a greater reward behind it! Similarly, although a newly freed soul may exhibit tremendous bravery (or foolishness, which is sometimes difficult to distinguish from the other) by marching right up to the Minotaur and trying to use Faith to convince it to abandon its post, it's not likely to garner a result more interesting than a hellish guffaw and a face full of snorted brimstone. If a Conflict seems like it is far too great for a character to handle, the other players may attempt to "talk them down", and get them to choose something more suited to their Virtue level. If they fail in their entreaties, the Little Devil may cut the Difficulty in half, and narrate some more suitable stakes. Likewise, if a player insists on using their overdeveloped Virtue to squash an insignificant challenge, the players may insist that they select a task more appropriate to their ability, and if they cannot make the player see reason, the Little Devil has the right to raise the stakes themselves, narrating the new Conflict, and doubling the Difficulty level. This raising or lowering of Difficulty may occur more than once per Conflict, so it is in the best interests of every player to play to their abilities, and not risk ruining the storytelling experience for the other players by aiming too high or too low.

Once the scene, conflict, stakes and Difficulty are set, the player and their Little Devil take up the dice, and roll to determine the outcome of the challenge laid before them. The player chooses one of the tracks in which they have a positive score on the Virtue side of things. This is the Virtue (Hope, Love, or Faith) that they will use to attempt to resolve the conflict. They take as many dice as they have points in their chosen Virtue, and add one for each applicable Trait that they are able to bring into play during the narration of the resolution of this scene. Now their opposition, the player representing the Little Devil picks up a number of dice equal to the Difficulty rating of this Conflict. The player takes one of their Woe markers and places it before them, representing the stakes of the Conflict, and both players roll.

When the dice have been thrown, and the dust settles, compare the values on the two players' dice. Whoever has the highest number showing wins the Conflict – if the players are tied for highest value, use the next highest number showing, and so on down the line until one player can claim victory. (If one player has more dice than the other, any number showing will beat a non-existent number on a non-existent die.) If the players manage to roll the exact same values on all of their dice, just re-roll, and take it from the top. If the player who initiated the Conflict wins the roll, they succeed – they may narrate the positive outcome of the scene, and further, they may convert one of their Woe markers into a point of Virtue! Return the one stone (or coin, or gumball, or whatever) to the central stash, and increase the value of one of your Sin/Virtue tracks, moving the counter to the right, or just marking the next highest value. Remember that a Sin at -1 will go straight to the corresponding Virtue at +1.

Example: Charlie attempts to ease the suffering of one of the other souls trapped in a black tree in the Dark Wood where his journey began. He describes a scene where he sits at the base of the tree, gently snapping off twigs, allowing blood to flow from the wounds, which lets the soul trapped within to recount its own tale of woe. He sets the stakes simply as, “Do I ease the suffering of this lost soul?” Dana sits to his left, and so takes the role of his Little Devil. She sets the Difficulty of the scene at 2, and everyone agrees. Charlie uses his only positive Virtue, Love, which is at its starting score of 1. They throw the dice – Charlie gets a 5, and Dana rolls a 2 and a 4. Charlie's character succeeds, and he narrates a short scene describing the outcome. After he finishes, he discards one of his Woe markers, and increases his Despair / Hope track from -1 Despair to +1 Hope, bringing his second Virtue into the positive.

If the challenging player loses the Conflict to their Little Devil, they have two options. They may choose to concede the Conflict, and draw one more Woe marker, which is added to their personal cache, along with the one that they put forward to represent the stakes of the scenario. The player representing the Little Devil may then narrate the negative outcome of the scene, describing the character's failure in sorrowful tones, or cackling with demonic glee. Either way, the Little Devil must play their role to the hilt – if (at any time during Il Piccolo Diavolo's performance, really, before or after the dice are rolled) any of the players feels that they're just coasting, or going easy on the unsuccessful character, they may call for a vote, and if half or more of the players agree, they may call for the Little Devil's player to make a Sin Check (described below) for their character. If the player's character fails the check, they drop one point on the Sin/Virtue track of their choosing, and play continues as before.

The player who loses the initial Conflict roll does not necessarily need to go softly into the night, however. If they wish, they may call another player in their soul-bound party to come to their aid, except for the player that is currently playing the part of the Little Devil. The player they call upon is not obligated to accept their request, and if they do refuse, the original player may continue to ask the others in the group for help, until there is nobody left to answer their call, and they must accept the consequences of failure. If someone does lend their assistance – and only one player may aid another in any given conflict – then the fate of the player who initiated the Conflict is in their hands. The assisting player may put forward one of their own Woe markers to increase the stakes of the Conflict, which the assisted player must match with one of their own. If the first player does not have enough Woe markers to go with the ones that are offered up, they may not receive any further assistance, and the scene ends in failure, as above. Now, after a Woe marker is put forth and matched, the player who requested assistance may take another die and cast it, adding it to their initial roll. The player's new ally, who has lent their aid to their ailing companion, must then examine the values of the dice on the table, and narrate the outcome of their offer.

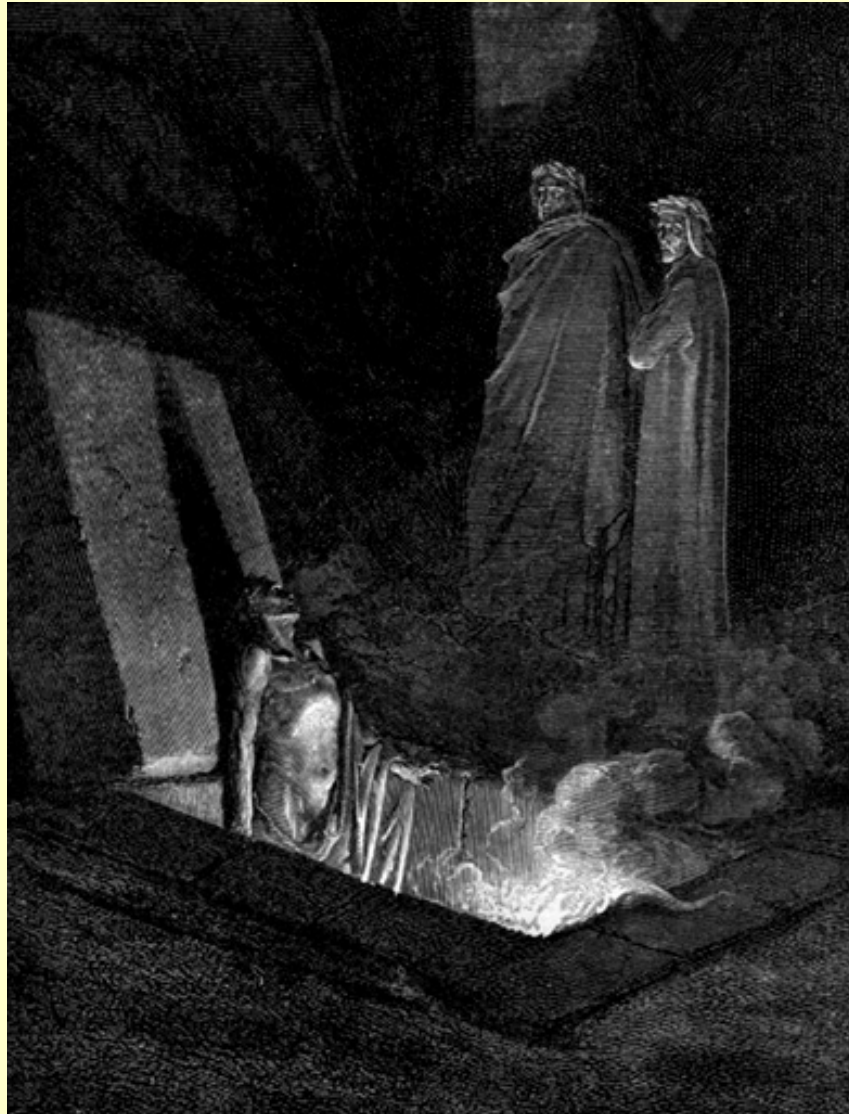
If this new die has turned the tide of Conflict, causing the player's batch of dice to win out over the dice that their Little Devil has sitting on the table, the assisting player narrates the method by which their help saved their friend from shame and failure. Neither player loses any Woe markers – they both end the scene with the same amount of tokens as they began it with – but the outcome overall is positive, and the victorious players may each choose to make a Virtue Check (described below), and potentially increase a Sin/Virtue track of their choosing by one notch. If, however, this new die does not alter the outcome of the Conflict, the would-be savior must then narrate how their efforts to help the initial player failed. All hope is not lost, however – the same player may put forth an additional Woe token, and repeat the process of assistance again. Once more, the initial player must match the token, roll another die, check the outcome, and the aiding player must narrate the result. This cycle will continue, increasing both the stakes and the tension of the scene, until one of two things happens – either the player who initiated the Conflict and their champion will emerge victorious, or one of them will not be able to but forward or match any more Woe markers, and the challenge will end in ignominious failure for the two of them.

If the players fail, the consequences are dire. First, each player must take as many new Woe markers as they put forth in the hopes of overcoming the challenge. So, if the initial player failed their first roll, and then they enlisted the aid of another player, who offered and failed to help twice, the first player would take three new Woe markers and add them to their personal cache, and the assisting player would take two. Additionally, the Little Devil may then force each of the players to make a

Sin Check (described below), and if they fail the check, Il Piccolo Diavolo dings them each one point on the Sin/Virtue track of their choosing, pushing them one step closer towards darkness. (The Little Devil is not required to choose the same Sin to decrease on both players – one may take an extra point of Apostasy, while the other sinks further into Despair.)

Example: Later on, after gaining a bit of Virtue and burning off a few Woe markers, Beth opens a scene in which the band of lost souls has ventured into the fourth Bolge of the Eighth Hell, where she confronts a damned Sorcerer, with his head turned backwards on his neck. She's feeling feisty, so she declares that she will attempt to use her Faith to make him see the error of his ways, renounce his sorcerous ways, and embrace the One True God. Charlie sits on her left, so he becomes her Little Devil, rubbing his hands with anticipation. Beth begins to narrate the situation, and when she approaches the moment of Conflict, she declares that the stakes are, "Do I convince the Sorcerer to give up his diabolical practices and turn away from evil, or does he make me reconsider exactly how much power the Lord has over nasty folks like him?" She then looks to Charlie to determine the Conflict level, and maybe add a little bit of color to the scene. Charlie decides that not only is the Sorcerer not buying any of this "One True God" baloney, but he rebukes Beth's character, attempting to shake her Faith with a display of his power, and thusly assigns a Difficulty of 8 to the Conflict. This is a little high, but Beth rates a 6 in Faith, so she accepts the challenge, and goes for the dice. She also reminds the rest of the players that her character, Bonnie, spent a lot of time as a girl skulking around fairgrounds and sideshows, and has seen plenty of this shyster's type. She therefore adds one die to her hand, bringing her total to 7 against the Sorcerer's 8.

Beth puts forward her initial stake of one Woe marker, and the players roll their dice: Beth makes a good showing with a 2,2,3,4,4,5,6, but Charlie beats her out with 1,1,2,4,4,4,6,6. She can't accept that an old charlatan like this fellow can knock her down so easily, so she calls on Dana for support. Dana considers her situation, and decides that she probably doesn't have enough Woe left to be of much use, and she might even do herself some damage if she came to Bonnie's aid, so she turns down Beth's request. Beth then turns to Adam, who replies that Antonio is always game for taking a bad guy down a notch or two, and he puts forward his first Woe marker, escalating the stakes of the Conflict. Beth matches his marker, and Adam describes how Antonio begins to kneel and recite prayers in the hopes of putting the Sorcerer off his game just enough for Bonnie to win him over. He takes a free die and throws it – it comes up a 2. Charlie cackles at the failure, and describes the Sorcerer laughing off Antonio's pathetic supplication.



Now he's gotten Tony all cheesed off, so Adam puts forward a second Woe marker, and Beth matches it again, with her last point of Woe. This is it – if they don't succeed this time around, even though Adam has Woe to spare, Beth can't match any more, so she is not able to accept any more of his help. Adam decides that humility and prayer aren't working, so he describes Antonio rising from his knees, hurling insults and commanding the evil spirits to leave the company of the Sorcerer, rendering him powerless, and open to receive Bonnie's entreaties of Faith. He takes his last die, and throws it – a 6! This pushes the pair over the edge, into victory (5,6,6 beats 4,6,6), and Adam allows Beth to narrate the final outcome, perhaps resulting in the eventual salvation of the Sorcerer's soul. They both take back the Woe markers that they wagered, putting them both at the same Woe level they entered the conflict with. Additionally, Adam and Beth may each make a Virtue Check (described below), possibly increasing their ability to overcome evil the next time around.

Earthly Conflicts

Once a player character gets all of their Sin/Virtue tracks on the positive side (all Virtuous), they may begin to attempt to resolve the pain and difficulties that drove them to suicide. These scenes play out almost exactly the same as the Infernal Conflicts, with a few key differences. Firstly, they may not be narrated as freely as the situations the characters find themselves in while wandering through Hell. They are directly related to one of the five Woe lines in their life story. Second, they do not strictly take place in Hell proper – they are more like “visions” of the character's previous life, and should be played out as if the character was back on Earth, living through the old scenarios once again. (Players may narrate some kind of transitions into and out of the visions, to provide a bit of context for the scene.) The other players may still aid the player who initiates the Conflict, as usual, but they must create some convincing justification to account for their presence in the story.

As in the Infernal Conflicts, the player to the left of the narrator plays the part of Il Piccolo Diavolo, but they do not set the Difficulty level of the scene themselves – rather, the Difficulty is determined by which line of Woe is being played through. Each of the five lines of Woe must be resolved in order – if a character is not able to unravel one of the steps that lead up to their final tragedy, they must repeat it, and attempt to work through it from a different angle, until they succeed, and proceed to the next one. The lines must be worked through in order, and have the following Difficulty levels:

“But one day...”	(The Taint)	Difficulty: 1
“And because of that...”	(The Consequence)	Difficulty: 3
“To make matters worse...”	(The Descent)	Difficulty: 5
“Eventually...”	(The Last Straw)	Difficulty: 7
“Ever since then...”	(The Regret)	Difficulty: 9

Again, these are visions of the character's past, not the actual character re-living their actual past. There is no time travel involved here, and nothing in the real world changes, except for the character's perception and acceptance of the things that transpired. As usual, once a player declares that they are attempting to resolve an Earthly Conflict, they begin to narrate the scene, this time drawing from the appropriate line from their own history. They set stakes, wager, win and lose Woe and Virtue as in an Infernal Conflict, and the challenge is ultimately resolved in the same way, choosing a number of dice equal to the rank of one of your Virtues (plus optional dice for the use of Traits in the challenge), rolled against the Little Devil's dice, equal

to the Difficulty score of the scene. The narrator, Little Devil, and any accomplice resolve and tell the story of what happens in the Conflict as usual, and the same rewards for success and penalties for failure still apply to all parties. The main difference in outcome in an Earthly Conflict is that if the narrating player succeeds, they mark that line of Woe as “resolved” on their character sheet, and bring themselves one step closer to Salvation. They may now move on to the next line, until they have cleared away their entire burden, and may join the rest of the group when they are ready to Ascend to one of the Heavenly Spheres.

A Note: It is possible that, later in the game, players may enter into Infernal and Earthly Conflicts without any Woe markers. This is totally fine. The only alteration to the process required is that the player does not put forth a point of Woe as an initial wager. They still gain a Woe marker if they fail to overcome the challenge, and they may still increase their Virtue when they succeed – however, if they have not risked a Woe marker in the challenge, they must make a Virtue Check (described below) to gain a point of Virtue. It is not automatic, as in normal Conflicts.



Also, if at any time a character has all of their Sin/Virtue markers in the negative, on the side of Sin, then they are considered Damned, and may not use any of their Virtues as dice in a Conflict. They may still enter into Infernal Conflicts, but they may only use their Trait dice, if they can roleplay themselves into an appropriate situation, and may rely on the aid of their fellow spiritual travelers to pull them through their scenes, and help them rebuild their Virtue, bit by bit. They may also continue to assist other players with their Conflicts, and win their Virtue back in that manner.

Sin and Virtue Checks

You have finally reached “Described Below”! There are a few situations in which the players are called upon to make a “Sin Check” or a “Virtue Check” for their characters. If a character takes part in a successful assisted challenge, or wins a regular Conflict without putting forward a point of Woe initially (because they have none, most likely), then they may make a Virtue Check to see if they can increase their Virtue on a chose track by one point. Contrariwise, if a player is on the losing side of a failed assisted challenge, or they have been accused of not being devilish enough while playing the Little Devil, they will be prodded to make a Sin Check for their character, and possibly move the marker on one of their tracks to the left, falling one step farther from grace. The final way that a player may be called upon to make a Sin or Virtue Check is through pure role-playing – if a player exhibits any of the primary or cardinal sins of virtues in the course of narrating any scene, whether they are the initiating character or not, they may be invited to make a Sin or Virtue Check if half or more of the other players agree that it is warranted.

Primary Virtues: Hope, Love, and Faith

Primary Sins: Despair, Hatred, and Apostasy

Cardinal Virtues: Charity, Chastity, Diligence, Humility,
Kindness, Patience, and Temerpance

Cardinal Sins: Anger, Envy, Gluttony, Greed, Lust,
Pride, and Sloth

Sin and Virtue Checks are similar, but fundamentally different. If a player or character is caught sinning, they must take the difference between their highest and lowest Sin and/or Virtue score, taking negative numbers into account. The player then rolls one die (d6), and if the result is equal to or less than the calculated difference, the player drops one notch further into sin on the track selected by the appropriate player, according to the situation. Notice that if all of a player's Sin and Virtue scores are equal to one another, they are in perfect balance, and no matter what their value is, the

player is unable to fall into Sin. A Virtue Check is figured in almost the same way: when a player is attempting to raise one of their Virtue scores, and a Check is required, they calculate their target number by finding the smallest difference between any two of their Sin or Virtue scores. Again, they roll one die, and if the roll is equal to or less than the target number, they get to bump up one of their Virtues one notch. Note again, if the character has any two Sin or Virtue scores that are the same, the difference between those two scores is zero, and it is impossible to gain Virtue. Note that in either case – a Sin Check or a Virtue Check – the target number may be six or greater, in which case no roll is required to raise or lower the value of a Sin or Virtue.

Example: In our previous scene, Adam and Beth's characters, Antonio and Bonnie, succeeded in an assisted Conflict, so they each get to make Virtue Checks. Beth has a Love of 3, Faith of 6, and Despair of -1. The smallest difference between values there is three (Faith minus Love), so she must roll a 1, 2, or 3 on one die to increase her Virtue. She succeeds with a roll of 2, and adds one point of Virtue to her -1 Despair score, moving herself fully into the realm of Virtuosity with a new score of 1 Hope! Adam checks his scores – he has a Love of 5, Hope of 5, and Faith of 2. Since the smallest difference between his values is zero (Hope and Love are equal), he cannot use a Virtue Check to increase any of his scores this time around.

But wait! Charlie was paying close attention to the previous Conflict, and notes aloud that Antonio seemed to exhibit quite a bit of Anger towards the Sorcerer during his final rebuke, with the shouting and the harsh language and the glavin. Dana agrees, so Adam takes his medicine like a trooper, and makes a Sin Check for Antonio. This time, he figures the greatest difference between scores, which turns out to be 3 (Love or Hope minus Faith), and he rolls one die. His roll comes up with a 1, and he groans as he knocks his Hope score down one notch, to 4. Maybe now he can make that Virtue Check next time...

Redemption

Play continues, with each player telling their stories in turn, one after another, each one describing the challenges and Conflicts they meet and overcome, until finally, their journey is over, and the hour of their Judgment is at hand. It's the big prize, the moment we've all been working towards and waiting for – the Ascension into the Heavenly Spheres.

The player characters' final Redemption may occur at any time all of the following conditions are met:

Every character must have zero Woe markers.
Every character must have resolved all five of their Woe story points.
Every character must have positive Virtue scores on all three tracks.

When any one of the characters meets the three criteria (no Woe, no unresolved story lines, and no Sin), they may declare themselves Risen, and make one final Sin Check for their character, before removing themselves from play. Once a character has Risen, they may not begin or narrate any more Conflicts, and they may not assist other players with their Conflicts. Instead of declaring their character Risen, a player may continue to participate in the storytelling portion of The Dark Wood, entering Conflicts, risking their Virtue and empty Woe buckets, and remaining fully involved in the fate of their fellow travelers. Once a player has Risen, however, they may not return to the game, until the final Ascension.

Once every player is satisfied with the progress of their characters, and they have all met the criteria for Redemption, they may all agree to Ascend to their respective Heavenly Spheres, and end this chapter in the characters' existences. Once all players have Risen, or have agreed to Ascend, each player makes one final Virtue Check – this is unlike the normal Virtue Checks that you have been making throughout the game, however. This Check will determine the final resting place of your character's soul within the Angelic Hierarchy. Each player should perform the following steps:

Take your character's highest Virtue score, and set it aside. If the two highest scores have the same number, just set one aside, and keep the other for the next step. (Note that Virtue scores may not be higher than nine.) Take the difference between the remaining two scores, and roll one die. If the roll is equal to or greater than the difference, add the number shown on the die to Virtue score that you have set aside. If the roll is less than the difference between the remaining two scores, subtract the number rolled from the Virtue score that has been set aside. This final value represents the number of the Heavenly Sphere in which your character's eternal soul will rest forever and ever, Amen. Consult the table on the following page to find your beloved soul's place in God's firmament.

If, for some reason, the final score that you've computed is zero or less, your soul has been judged to be imperfect, and will not be admitted into Heaven. It is cast back down into the Dark Wood, where you will spend yet another slice of eternity as a twisted, tormented black tree on the shores of the boiling River Phlegethon, until one day, when another Angel descends upon you with another message of Hope...

The Heavenly Spheres

1. The Moon: Faithfulness marred by inconstancy
2. Mercury: Service marred by ambition
3. Venus: Love marred by wantonness
4. The Sun: Wisdom; Theologians
5. Mars: Courage; Warriors
6. Jupiter: Justice; Rulers
7. Saturn: Temperance; Contemplatives
8. The Fixed Stars: the Church Triumphant
9. The Crystalline, or Primum Mobile: the Angelic Orders
- 10 or higher. The Empyrean: the Holy Trinity, the Virgin, the Angels and the Saints



Glossary

This would have been a really good idea, if I had the time to do it up right. How about this – if you come across any words in the text that you don't understand, head on over to <http://dictionary.reference.com/> and look them up. If you still don't understand what they mean in the context of the game, drop me a line at DarkWoodGlossary@gizmet.com, and I'll do my best to put things straight for you.

(Like everyone's supposed to know what “Apostasy” means... sheesh.)

Design Notes

Whew! That was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I have a newfound appreciation and respect for all the 24-hour RPG entries, and especially those who put their necks (and possibly their sanity) on the line by crafting an entry for the Ronnies. My congratulations and admiration go out to every last one of you. My eyes hurt.

I have to admit, the core Premise for The Dark Wood came to me in the shower immediately after reading Ron's October contest posting, and it pretty much all hung on the character creation concept, and some vague mechanic involving “Woe points”.

I'm really quite pleased with the way the character creation came out – I've been dying to use this little Impro exercise in a real game – but I'm not totally satisfied with the way the scene resolution mechanics worked out. I tried to balance the initial benefit of high Woe and low Virtue with the later situation of low Woe and high Virtue, and I think that works, but something about the way Woe is burned off feels a bit sluggish and off to me. Maybe I'll be able to work something out in playtesting.

I think the Virtue and Sin Checks worked out okay, too. I knew that I needed a little piece of glue in there somewhere to justify or encourage a bit more meatier role-playing in there somewhere, and I think that may have just done it. Of course, it's one of those sketchy fiddly little things that came to me in a flash, and it totally untested, so it might actually be a nightmare in practice. Time will tell.

I had originally intended The Dark Wood to take an evening, two at the most, to play through with a smallish group of friends. I'm not sure whether to be pleased or disappointed to realize that it will probably take a good deal longer to play properly.

The Dark Wood = Character Sheet

Name: _____

Occupation: _____

Story:

2) There was nothing that I loved more than:

3) Every day, I would:

4) But one day:

5) And because of that:

6) To make matters worse:

7) Eventually:

8) Until finally, I couldn't take it any more, and I:

9) And ever since then:

Despair | -9 | -8 | -7 | -6 | -5 | -4 | -3 | -2 | -1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Hope

Hatred | -9 | -8 | -7 | -6 | -5 | -4 | -3 | -2 | -1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Love

Apostasy | -9 | -8 | -7 | -6 | -5 | -4 | -3 | -2 | -1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Faith

Woe:

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank the Academy, and all the little people...

Okay, and that Keith Johnstone guy who brung forth all sorts of improvisational goodness, and Andy, my improv teacher, for introducing me to the "Once upon a time..." storytelling game that the character creation portion of this evening's entertainment was based on, and for encouraging me to have fun, be obvious, and not be afraid to fail.

The storytelling framework, and the intimate involvement of all the players in the creation of characters and narration of conflict was inspired by Ben Lehman's sublime game *Polaris*, of course. The meat of my dice resolution mechanics were ripped from the pages of Ron Edwards's fantastic *Sorcerer*, and the use of player attributes to help drive the plot of the overarching story comes from *My Life With Master*, by Paul Czege. All the clunky bits, bothersome loose threads in the gameplay, and editing bumbles come from me, and all the brilliant pieces are probably from some other great game that I've read and forgotten about.

Thanks again to Ron Edwards for sponsoring the Ronnie Awards, and forcing me to get off my ass and actually write one of these things all (or most) of the way through. Thank you also for your kind words of encouragement – I might otherwise have abandoned my original idea when I saw that it might not be as original as I'd thought. (Curse you, Clint Black!)

Thanks to all the fine folks at the Forge – I've learned more about RPG design in six months of lurking there than I have in the last twenty-odd years of playing by myself. Special thanks for Vincent Baker for setting such a fine example with *Dogs in the Vineyard* that I had absolutely no other choice but to dive head first into this amazing little world of indie game design. (Thanks also to Vincent for pointing his readers to the fonts used in these pages, Oldstyle, Oldstyle Small Caps, and WW2 Blackletter, all from the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society.)

Thanks to my dad, for buying me my first D&D books when I was 13.

And most of all, thanks to Bernie, who not only puts up with my monomaniacal obsession with all types of games, but who also brought me food and drink while I hammered away hungry at my laptop, and drove me to work when I was too tired to see straight. I'll be in to bed soon, I promise. Just one more pass through...