

The Tension Pool

The Tension Pool is an optional rule for table-top role-playing games of all kinds. As the name implies, the Tension Pool adds a sense of rising tension to your game. The Tension Pool also increases the players' awareness of the passage of in-game time. And it adds a sense of weight to time-wasting and reckless actions.

Best of all, the Tension Pool is intuitive, easy-to-use, and you've already got everything you need to use the Tension Pool in your game. You don't have to buy any new gaming things.

I realize that some gamers consider the lack of new stuff to buy a flaw and not a feature. Feel free to buy new stuff if you want to. I didn't say you can't.

What You Need

- Six standard 6-sided dice. Hereafter, those are called the Tension Dice.
- A small bowl or container to hold the dice. Hereafter, that is called the Tension Pool.

You don't need special dice to use the Tension Pool. But if you've got d6s with unique symbols replacing one of the sides, those work particularly well. Whenever these rules mention a Tension Die showing a 1, read that as the Tension Die showing its unique symbol instead.

The best Tension Pool container is transparent so everyone can see how many dice are in the pool and made of glass or metal so everyone can hear a nice, clear sound whenever you toss a Tension Die into the Tension Pool.

How to Use the Tension Pool

Here's the simple, step-by-step Tension Pool rules. These are all you have to remember.

Setting Up the Tension Pool

1. Put the Tension Pool in the middle of the table where everyone can see it.
2. Put the Tension Dice where you can reach them and easily and loudly toss them into the Tension Pool.

Managing the Tension Pool

When the Tension Pool is in play, whenever the players take an action, you'll need to decide whether to add a die to the Tension Pool, roll the Tension Pool, or do both. You'll also periodically clear the Tension Pool. After rolling the Tension Pool, you'll often introduce a Complication in the adventure.

- Whenever a player commits to a **Time-Consuming** action, **Add a Tension Die**.
- Whenever a player commits to a **Reckless** action, **Roll the Tension Pool**.
- Whenever a player commits to an action that's both **Time-Consuming** and **Reckless**, first **Add a Tension Die** and then **Roll the Tension Pool**.
- Whenever you add the sixth Tension Die to the Tension Pool, **Clear the Tension Pool**.

Most actions are neither Time-Consuming nor Reckless. Lots of actions won't result in you fiddling with the Tension Pool.

During battles, chases, negotiations, and other action-packed encounters, ignore the Tension Pool. The Tension Pool is only for managing the action during investigation, exploration, and other slow parts of the game.

Adding Tension Dice

During exploration, investigation, and other slow-paced parts of the game, whenever a player commits their character to a Time-Consuming action, add one Tension Die to the Tension Pool. It's as simple as picking up one of the Tension Dice and dropping it loudly into the container so everyone knows what happened.

Time-Consuming Actions

Use your best judgement about what constitutes Time-Consuming. As a rule, any action that takes an exceptionally long amount of time given the current game action is Time Consuming.

While the players are delving a dungeon or infiltrating an enemy base, most actions play out in seconds. A minute at the most. Any action that takes a few minutes to play out is Time-Consuming.

While the players are playing detective in town, most actions play out in an hour or some fraction thereof. Any action that takes a few hours to resolve is Time Consuming.

Simultaneous Actions

When one player undertakes a Time-Consuming action, the other players can use that same time to undertake their own Time-Consuming actions. Don't add multiple Tension Dice to the Tension Pool if several players commit to Time-Consuming actions at the same time. In fact, when one player commits to a Time-Consuming action, ask the other players if they want to do anything while they're waiting for the first player to finish their action.

Adding Multiple Dice

If a player takes an especially long, complex Time-Consuming action, you can add two, three, or more Tension Dice to the Tension Pool.

Rolling the Tension Pool

During exploration, investigation, and other slow-paced parts of the game, whenever a player commits to a Reckless action, roll the Tension Pool and check for a Complication.

1. Pick up all the Tension Dice currently in the Tension Pool and roll them.
 - a. If there are no Tension Dice in the Tension Pool, pick up one Tension Die and roll it.
2. If any of the dice shows a 1, a **Complication** arises.
3. Put the Tension Dice back in the Tension Pool.

Reckless Actions

Use your best judgement about what constitutes a Reckless action. Generally, Reckless actions are those that ignore danger, risk serious immediate consequences, attract unwanted attention, or involve a high risk for a fast and easy result.

While the players are delving or infiltrating, Reckless actions might include having noisy arguments, smashing down doors, or destroying security devices.

While the players are playing detective, Reckless actions might include threatening informants, carelessly sharing information about the investigation, or breaking into crime scenes on public streets.

Clearing the Tension Pool

Whenever you add the sixth Tension Die to the Tension Pool, immediately roll the Tension Pool. After determining whether a Complication arises, put the Tension Dice aside and start all over with an empty Tension Pool.

Always roll the Tension Pool to check for a Complication when you clear it. Never take the Tension Dice out of the Pool without rolling them.

Rolling the Pool Twice

If a player takes an action that's both Time-Consuming and Reckless when there are already five Tension Dice in the Tension Pool, you don't have to roll the Tension Pool twice. Just add the sixth Tension Die and then clear the Tension Pool.

But you can roll the Tension Pool twice if you want to. Depending on the results, you can introduce two Complications, combine two Complications into one especially complicated Complication, or introduce a particularly terrible Complication. It's up to you.

Complications

Complications are unexpected developments that make the players' lives more complicated, just as the name implies. They might represent encounters with monsters, hazards, or traps; changes in the environment; troubling revelations; setbacks, injuries, or losses; or even enemy machinations happening behind the scenes. Complications should always involve a risk, cost, loss, or sacrifice.

You can imagine that a Complication represents something taking an action against the players. That something could be enemies, cosmic forces, luck, fate, the gods, the world, the environment, Narrative Causality, or the perversity of the cosmos.

Complication Timing

When the Tension Pool results in a Complication, that Complication can arise immediately. Simply describe the event and play out the results. You can also delay introducing a Complication until later in the game. Just don't wait too long. A Complication should arise soon after the Tension Pool roll it resulted from.

It's important for the players to see that Complications come from the Tension Pool and are thus a result of their inefficient or reckless actions. Otherwise, they will lose the all-important sense of agency that keeps Complications from feeling like a random screwjob.

Complication Scope and Scale

Generally, a Complication should be an annoyance, not a disaster. Rarely should a Complication pose a threat or challenge similar to that of a normal encounter. When a Complication includes a major threat, the players should be able to avoid it. At a cost.

Players should earn only minor rewards for dealing with Complications. They should offer only minimal amounts of experience, treasure, glory, or other game rewards. If any.

Random Complications

Rather than inventing Complications on the fly, you can prepare a list of Complications appropriate for the game you intend to run. You can then randomly determine which Complications arise during play.

Organize your Complications by their rarity or impact: Common or Mild, Uncommon or Moderate, Rare or Major, and Very Rare or Extreme. Then arrange those Complications as shown in the example tables below:

Simple Random Complication Table (Roll 1d8 + 1d12)

Result	Complication Rarity or Severity
2 – 4	Very Rare or Extreme
5 – 6	Rare or Major
7 – 8	Uncommon or Moderate
9 – 13	Common or Minor
14 – 15	Uncommon or Moderate
16 – 17	Rare or Major
18 – 20	Very Rare or Extreme

Advanced Random Complication Table (Roll 1d8 + 1d12)

Result	Complication Rarity or Severity
2	Very Rare or Extreme
3	Very Rare or Extreme
4	Very Rare or Extreme
5	Rare or Major
6	Rare or Major
7	Uncommon or Moderate
8	Uncommon or Moderate
9	Common or Minor
10	Common or Minor
11	Common or Minor
12	Common or Minor
13	Common or Minor
14	Uncommon or Moderate
15	Uncommon or Moderate
16	Rare or Major
17	Rare or Major
18	Very Rare or Extreme
19	Very Rare or Extreme
20	Very Rare or Extreme

The 1d8 + 1d12 roll might seem odd, but it was actually one of the methods used to determine random encounters in early editions of Dungeons & Dragons. Mathematically, it provides a very convenient probability distribution. Results in the middle of the table are all equally likely and the probabilities fall off sharply for the outlying results. You can also roll 2d10 to similar effect.

The Time Pool

The Time Pool is a variant of the Tension Pool you can use to track time more precisely during gameplay.

The Time Pool uses the Tension Pool like an hourglass. The Tension Pool represents a specific unit of time and each Tension Die represents a fraction of that time. The Time Pool approach does involve some abstraction and handwaving and it takes a few sessions of play for players to get used to it. But it does enable precise time-tracking without a lot of bookkeeping.

Time Scale

When setting up the Tension Pool as a Time Pool, first decide on an appropriate scale based on what's happening in your game.

Minutes and Hours

When players are delving dungeons, infiltrating bases, or engaged in other moment-to-moment adventuring activities, the Time Pool represents one hour and each die represents ten minutes.

Hours and Days

When the players are exploring civilized areas, investigating mysteries, or running errands in town, the Time Pool represents one day and each die represents four hours.

When the players are traveling the wilderness, the same Time Scale applies.

Days and Weeks

When the players are recuperating between adventures, buying and selling goods, crafting equipment, or hunting for their next adventuring lead, the Time Pool represents one week and each die represents one day.

The Days and Weeks scale implies a six-day week. You can either adjust your in-game calendar accordingly, assume that there's one day each week on which it's impossible to do business for cultural or religious reasons, or just not worry about the minor inconsistency the six-day week creates.

Adding Dice to the Time Pool

The Time Scale defines a Time-Consuming action. For example, any action that takes between two and ten minutes constitutes a Time-Consuming action at Minutes and Hours scale. Any action that takes more than an hour but less than four constitutes a Time-Consuming action at Hours and Days scale. And so on.

Moreover, whenever in-game time passes, add the appropriate number of dice to the Time Pool regardless of the players' actions.

It's good practice to "round up" actions to the nearest time increment when using the Time Pool. After all, adventurers do a lot of moving around, chatting, digging through bags, handing off light sources, and double-checking things. Picking a lock might be possible in five minutes, but when you factor in the debate about whether to pick the lock or just bust down the door, the rogue digging out his tools, the wizard coming closer with the light, the rogue examining the lock carefully and selecting the right mix of tools, the rogue packing away his tools, and so on, you can easily get ten-minutes of wasted in-game time out of it. A half-hour conversation in town can fill hours when you factor in asking around about the person's location, setting up the meeting, exchanging pleasantries, and arguing about who's paying the tavern bill.

Here's a good rule of thumb when it comes to dungeon exploration: add one Tension Die to a Minutes and Hours Time Pool for every room wherein the players have an encounter and then ransack or every three empty rooms the players casually wander through.

Durations and the Time Pool

Rather than tracking the precise durations of in-game effects, you can simply decrement or expire any long-lasting effects when you clear the pool. Whenever you clear the Time Pool at Hours and Minutes scale, for example, decrement all ongoing effect durations by one hour regardless of when that effect came into play.

This abstraction will sometimes lead to effects expiring after only a few minutes when they should have lasted for an hour, but the players will eventually learn to synchronize their long-lasting bonuses with the clock and the abstraction saves a lot of bookkeeping in the long run.

Actions that Fill the Time Pool

The players will sometimes take long actions that are sufficient to fill the Time Pool. And there will sometimes occur long spans of uneventful time summarized in a single sentence of narration. Examples include the players taking an extended rest while exploring a dungeon or an uneventful day of travel across the wilderness.

Whenever in-game time passes sufficient to completely fill the Time Pool, simply roll all six Tension Dice as if you were rolling and clearing the pool to check for a Complication. Then continue play as normal, introducing Complications whenever you see fit.

If there are any Tension Dice in the Time Pool when you roll a full pool in this way, replace them after you roll.

Changing Time Scales

Whenever the in-game action switches from a larger Time Scale to a smaller Time Scale, clear the Pool by rolling the dice currently in the Time Pool and then setting all the Tension Dice aside.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does the Tension Pool change the game? Why does it work?

In most RPGs, time just doesn't matter. Unless there's a time limit on a scenario, the players can waste as much time as they want without jeopardizing their chances of success. And time limits just don't always make sense. The Tension Pool makes wasting time a risky endeavor. If the players waste time searching a room over and over, convinced there's something to find, or arguing about which direction to go, they increase the odds that Complications will sap them of their resources and make it harder for them to succeed.

The Tension Pool also provides a way to classify actions in terms of their risk and efficiency. In most RPGs, there's little difference between smashing a door down and picking the lock. So players simply do whatever's most likely to succeed. Under the Tension Pool, breaking the door down is Reckless, whereas picking the lock is Time Consuming.

Most importantly, though, the Tension Pool mirrors human psychology regarding the awareness of time, risk, and stress. People's awareness of time and risk rises and falls, which leads to all sorts of interesting behavioral patterns including things like risk homeostasis and the gambler's fallacy. Most people just aren't aware of how the passage of time, tension, stress, and risk alter their behavior so it's almost impossible for a role-player to portray a character under similar conditions. The Tension Pool imposes a rising and falling awareness of time, risk, and stress and tricks the players' brains into playing characters as they'd behave under actual stress conditions.

What if the players game the system? Isn't that metagaming?

Good. That's precisely what you want. As noted above, the Tension Pool imposes a sense of time passing and growing danger that helps put the players in the same mindset as their characters. Something most role-players lack the psychological awareness to deliberately pull off.

The truth is, in real life, people often "game the system" when it comes to managing time and risk.

If you've ever taken a timed exam, you've gamed the Tension Pool system even if you never noticed your own behavior. Initially, you're focused on the test and barely notice time sliding by. But then, you glance at the clock. That makes you assess how you're doing. As a result, you either relax and take your time on the next few questions or else you become stressed and rush through the next few questions. Eventually, you forget about the time and focus again. When you hit a particularly difficult question, you become aware of how long you're taking on that one question and become stressed. Depending on your personality, you might make a reckless guess and move on rather than waste more time on that one question or you might try to ignore the clock and focus on the question. Or you might move past the question and come back later. Either way, after you deal with the hard question, you generally become more careful and focused on the next few questions.

Different players respond to the Tension Pool in different ways, but they all respond. Some get reckless when it's empty and careful when it's full. Others ignore it until a Complication arises — or doesn't arise — and then grow more careful afterwards. Others still refuse to pay it any attention, staying disciplined in their decision making.

In short, gaming the Tension Pool actually makes the players behave more like their characters, responding to stress, risk, and time pressures organically.

Can you provide some example Complications?

Yes. I can.

- An ogre comes crashing through the underbrush.
- You see a corporate security patrol heading up the street toward you.
- The floor gives way; a pit trap!
- Ouch! A thorny plant scratched you. You start to feel dizzy.
- A mysterious stranger calls out from the shadows.
- A recent rockslide blocks the way forward.
- A fall of gravel draws your attention. A landslide!
- Swollen with snowmelt and recent rain, the river has washed out the bridge.
- Unbeknownst to you, the Thieves' Guild has set their plan in motion.
- A root snags your leg and you go down! Oh, no, your ankle's sprained.
- A sudden spray of hot steam from a burst pipe catches you in the face. You're blind!
- Someone's been spreading rumors about you. That's going to make your interactions difficult.
- This doesn't look like the right way. You're lost. Time to backtrack and get your bearings.
- Your phone is gone! Did you drop it when you crossed that rope bridge?
- Ugh! Some of your rations have gone moldy.
- Someone jostles you in the crowd. Was that a pickpocket?
- While you're exploring, enemies return to the rooms you've cleared.
- Your shield took a nasty blow; one more hit will certainly destroy it.
- Your trusted hireling reveals he's been working for your enemies the whole time.
- A stray shot must have hit the drive core. The whole reactor could melt down.
- A plume of smoke rises from the next street. You hear a cry for help!
- "You have to come back with me and fulfil your oath of duty."
- You have offended the gods! You will know no peace until you make it right.
- That security guard you bullied the information out of? He's back. With friends.
- After ten minutes of careful work on the lock, you discover the treasure chest... is empty.
- Someone tipped off the bad guys because they're here waiting for you.

What are the odds of a complication arising?

The probability of a Complication arising varies with the number of Tension Dice in the Tension Pool when you roll it:

Complication Probabilities

Dice in Pool	Probability of a Complication Arising
1	16.7%
2	30.6%
3	42.1%
4	51.8%
5	59.8%
6	66.5%

If you use the 1d8 + 1d12 method described above to randomly determine the impact or rarity of a Complication when it arises, the probabilities for each class of Complication are as follows:

Complication Probabilities

Rarity or Impact	Probability of a Complication Arising
Common or Minor	41.7%
Uncommon or Moderate	27.1%
Rare or Major	18.8%
Very Rare or Extreme	12.5%

If you use the 1d8 + 1d12 method described above to randomly determine the impact or rarity of a Complication when it arises, here's a comprehensive list of probabilities depending on the number of dice in the Tension Pool when you roll it.

Comprehensive Complication Probabilities by Number of Dice in the Tension Pool

Dice in Pool	No Complication	Common Complication	Uncommon Complication	Rare Complication	Very Rare Complication
1	83.3%	7.0%	4.5%	3.1%	2.1%
2	69.4%	12.7%	8.3%	5.7%	3.8%
3	57.9%	17.6%	11.4%	7.9%	5.3%
4	48.2%	21.6%	14.0%	9.7%	6.5%
5	40.2%	24.9%	16.2%	11.2%	7.5%
6	33.5%	27.7%	18.0%	12.5%	8.3%

How can I modify the Tension Pool to make it work even better?

Don't. It's already great.

In all seriousness, the Tension Pool is yours to do with as you please, but the rules for managing the pool — the number of dice, the way they're added, when they're rolled — have been carefully designed and thoroughly tested. Lots of gamers have used these rules. They are simple, intuitive, and easy to grasp. Exactly what you want from a visible table rule that changes player behavior.

Because the Tension Pool represents the merciless forward march of time — and the consequent rise in narrative tension — no one should have the power to mess with the Tension Pool. Don't invent class abilities, spells, or even monster abilities that add or remove Tension Dice from the Pool. At best, you can build game effects that force you to roll the pool, like a security alarm or a monster screaming for help.

If you want to get creative, get creative with the Complications. If you want to lower the overall probabilities the Tension Pool provides, add some very minor Complications to the list. Things like scary noises and minor distractions that add flavor to the game but have no other effect. If you want to make an adventure site unique, build a unique Complication table. If you want to make a site dangerous, only include high-impact Complications on the list. Or make the minor Complications very rare and the extreme Complications common.

Or invent a new, unique way of determining or using Complications.

In short, the Complications are a great place to express your creativity and make the mechanic your own. The basic rules of the Tension Pool itself? Those should be indelible, unchanging, merciless forces of the Universe. Or at least, merciless forces of the Narrative Temporal Causality that governs the Pretend Elf Universe.