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PSST! If you want to know more about running this game for different age groups, [flip to page 181](#). The info you're looking for is there.



We Open With A Tragedy

Your brother is in a coma. Or your mother has fallen sick. Or the well that supports the village will only give black ichor when the bucket is lowered for water, and the drought has been going for three months now.

The point is, something has gone wrong, and it is not within your power to fix it.

Or at least, it's not within *mortal* power to fix it.

There exists a fish, known in local legend, that has the power to reverse this tragedy. It is a crafty creature, a denizen of grottos and sunless spots, rich with the wiles of hundreds of years of avoiding the sparkle of hook and the wriggle of bait. But if you can find it, and master it, your village will be saved.

Obtaining it will not be easy.

It lives at the heart of the Old Region, a wild, untamed place many days' journey from your village. There are animals there, and other anglers, that will vie with you for your prize.

But your courage is strong. Your will is true. The price of defeat is too great to pay, so you have not even considered it.

Instead your cooler is packed, your line is straight, and a straw hat rests squarely on your brow.

Whatever challenges lie before you, you will meet them with Rod, Reel, & Fist.



Those Who Walk The Road Of Fish Walk A Road Of Conflict

Rod, Reel, & Fist is a tabletop roleplaying game in which the players take on the roles of heroic fishers attempting to save their village. To do so, they must navigate the obstacles of the Old Region, catching fish and defending themselves against hostile animals, until they finally come face to fin with the Fish Of Legend.

Guiding them on their journey will be the SWAMP BEING, or SB. The SB is a player too, but instead of taking on the role of one of the fishers the SB takes on the role of the rest of the setting. The SB narrates the parts of the game-world that the fishers interact with, showing how they change and respond in reaction to the players' actions. Or to put it another way: the players take on the roles of the fishers trying to save their village, and the SB takes on the roles of the fish, animals, anglers, and obstacles that oppose them.

So if a player says "I check out the old beached boat", or "I scramble up the side of the hill", or "I dip my line in the water", the SB explains what they find there and how it reacts to them.

The SB's goal *isn't* to be adversarial. They're not trying to win. Or at least they're not trying to win by beating the players. Instead, the SB wins if the story is interesting, the obstacles are engaging, and everyone has a good time.

Honestly, *everyone* wins if *everyone* has a good time.

If your group can't decide who should take on the noble role of SWAMP BEING, it's recommended that the SB be the person with the most experience with tabletop roleplaying games. If that's no one, experience with board games, videogames, improv theater, stage productions, or freestyle rap is a valid substitute.

Once you have your SWAMP BEING in place, you're all ready to gather your gear and set up the game world.

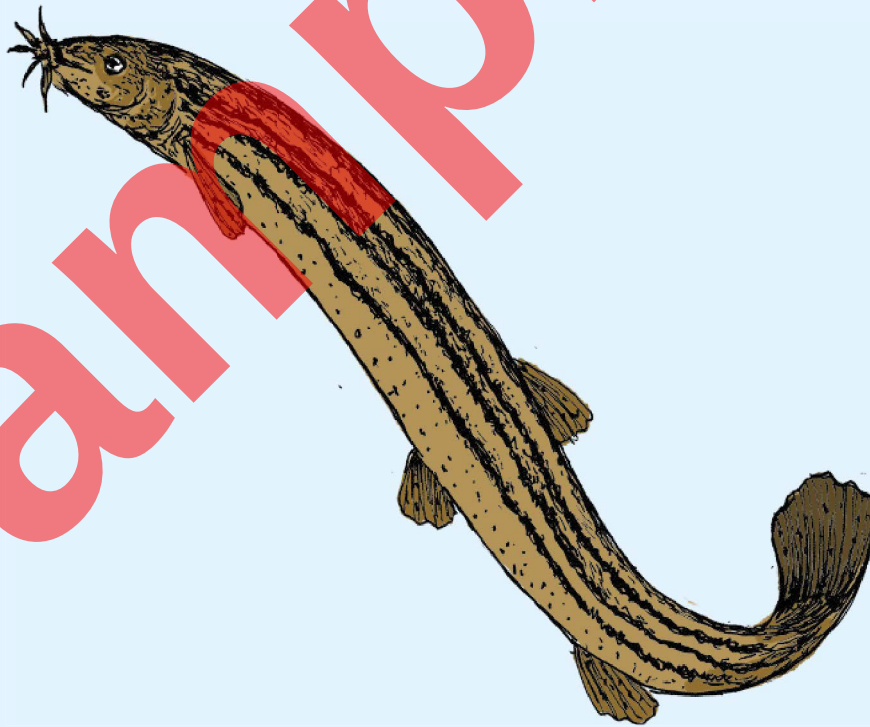


Gathering Your Gear

To play Rod, Reel, & Fist, you're going to need the following:

- this book
- a handful of six-sided dice (called d6s)
- scrap paper and pencils
- a quiet place to play
- optionally some light snacks and drinks, if the place where you're playing will allow it

Oh, and you'll need a game world.



Designing Your World

The default setting for Rod, Reel, & Fist is a sort of magic-realism version of rural Japan (or else wherever the players are from) in the early 1980s. There are vending machines, fast trains, animated television programs, and the economy is on everyone's minds, but to the characters of Rod, Reel, & Fist those are usually all background elements.

What's in the forefront of everyone's minds is the Village.

SWAMP BEING, ask the player to your right **where the fishers' Village** is. Then ask the player to their right what the Village **looks like**. Then ask the player to *their* right to name an important **person in the Village**. Repeat this last step until every person in your group has **defined at least one** important person in the Village. Now, if the group wishes, **come up with a name** for the Village. If you have a small group of players and the spotlight rotates all the way to yourself, you can ask yourself **these questions** too.

Once you know what the Village is like, you need to figure out what bad thing has happened or is about **to happen to it**. Ask the player to your left what the **Tragedy** is that has recently **affected the Village**. Then ask the player to the left of them who the **Tragedy** most **affects**. Then ask the player to the left of *them* who *else* the **Tragedy** affects. If you have a small group of players and the spotlight rotates all the way to yourself, you can ask yourself these questions too.

After you **have the Tragedy** established, you need to find out more about the **Old Region** that the Fishers must journey into in order to stop the Tragedy. Where **is the Old Region**? Ask the player on your right. Then ask the player to the **right of them** **why** it's secluded. Then ask the player to the right of *them* which part of the Old Region the Fish of Legend is located in. Then ask the next player **on the right** why that area is particularly dangerous. If you have a small group of players and the spotlight rotates all the way to yourself, you can ask yourself these questions too.

With the Old Region set, the last thing you need to do is establish the **Fish Of Legend**. Going around in a circle, starting on the left and proceeding through every player (including yourself), have someone define a single fact about the Fish Of Legend. This could be a curative property it has, or why it's so hard to catch, or what has become of people who failed to catch it.

During all of these steps, if there's an idea or character or location that gets brought up but that isn't fully defined, the group is encouraged to **fill in the details** now. When filling in details, you don't need to stick to a strict turn order.



Anyone can riff off of someone else's concept, and you should continue adding details until everyone is happy with the result.

If at any point during this process **someone is really bothered** by an idea or detail, or if an idea or detail gets thrown into the mix that the rest of the group doesn't like, let the person who contributed it redesign it so that it doesn't seriously bother anyone.

At the same time, if the group finds the setting of 1980s Japan to be not to their taste, they may create their own setting based on any criteria they want, as long as they can all agree on what goes into it. There is also a list of pre-made alternate settings later in the book ([page 128](#)), and the SB may simply set the game in whatever place they are most familiar with if this will make it easiest for them to run it.

Once everyone in the Village, the Tragedy, the Old Region, and the Fish Of Legend are defined, **your world is ready to play**. The SWAMP BEING will likely need to fill in setting details from time to time during play (for example, does a rail line run through your town? Are there bears in this region? What types of sodas were available in 1980s Japan?), but now that you've got the big aspects of the setting all hammered out, it's time to learn the basics of gameplay and create the Fishers.





Game Systems

Rod, Reel, & Fist is played using these core elements.

Dice

Although Rod, Reel, & Fist is ultimately about telling a story with your friends, there will be times when it's not automatically clear what happens next. For example, maybe a skilled Fisher is trying to scale a mountainside in the rain.

Sure, they're competent, and maybe they've even hiked this slope before, but the rain is really pounding down and the rock and dirt are quite slick.

So how do you decide whether the Fisher succeeds or fails in this task? You roll the dice.

The dice in Rod, Reel, & Fist work like this: any time a situation comes up where the outcome of an action is uncertain, and where the results matter to the plot, the dice are brought out and the SB calls for a roll.

To determine whether or not a Fisher succeeds on a roll, the SB sets a **Target Number** (also called a TN) based on how difficult the task is.

A **TN 3 = Easy** task is one that could be failed with a lot of bad luck, but that people in most situations will succeed at. TN 3 is catching a butterfly in a net, climbing a beginner rock wall, or swimming against a mild current.

A **TN 4 = Normal** task is one that people have a decent chance of failing if they take it lightly. Climbing a slippery hill, parallel parking on a crowded street, or swatting a hornet are all TN 4 tasks.

A **TN 5 = Hard** task is one that seems formidable right from the start. Dodging a fastball, climbing a craggy cliff, or swimming against a moderate current are all TN 5 tasks.

A **TN 6 = Very Difficult** task is one that people do not expect to succeed at without using a lot of their resources or getting very lucky. Shoving a large boulder out of the way, struggling out of quicksand, or swimming against a riptide are all examples of TN 6s.

A **TN 7+ = Legendary** task is one that seems impossible without spending resources or getting help. Wriggling out of handcuffs, wall-kicking your way up between two buildings, or sprinting down an icy slope in the dark without falling are all TN 7 tasks.



Of course, sometimes the SB's sense of what should have a high TN won't line up with the players', so if the players ever unanimously think the TN on a roll should be lower, the SB is encouraged to drop the TN at least by a point or two.

Once the TN is set, **the Fisher rolls 1d6**. If the number on the die **meets or beats the TN**, the Fisher succeeds and they narrate achieving whatever they were trying to accomplish. If they fail, it's a **Setback** and the SB narrates how the situation changes based on their incomplete success.

Depending on the Fisher's Equipment, Type, and other abilities and bonuses (we'll talk about these more in a minute), they may get to roll more than one d6. When a character rolls multiple dice, as long as one of their dice meets or beats the TN, they succeed.

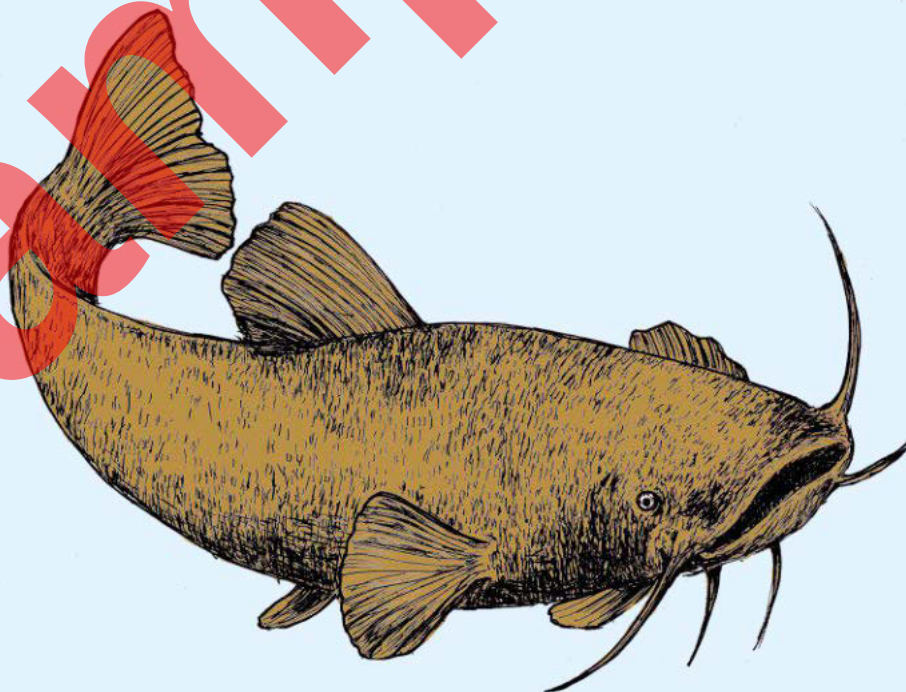
Low Lethality

Failing rolls is less dangerous in Rod, Reel, & Fist than it is in other systems.

Most of the time a Setback will mean a change in a situation that presents the players with a new problem or obstacle to address.

A Fisher that fails to scramble up a rocky slope might tumble into a thicket at the bottom, or a Fisher that fails to endure a cold downpour might fall sick, but a Setback is always a *complication*, never insurmountable. Setbacks can pile up to the point where a Fisher's best bet is just to disengage from a situation and come back later with a new approach, but here's an example of a dice outcome you will never encounter in basic Rod, Reel, & Fist: "you die."

In Rod, Reel, & Fist, you can certainly get beat up by an animal or another Fisher, but all that does is sends you to the hospital or leaves you in the grass, recuperating from your encounter. The only way a Fisher can die in Rod, Reel, & Fist is if it is A) narratively appropriate, and B) the player and SB both agree that it should happen.



Very High TNs

Now, you might have noticed that if a player only ever rolls d6s, the highest they can roll is a 6. Which means they can never succeed against a TN 7.

Fortunately, when a player rolls multiple dice and two or more of those dice come up the same number, those dice get combined. When you Combine Dice, you set them aside and treat their number as the number on the dice, plus the number of times you rolled it.

So if you roll two 3s, they become a 5. That's the number on the dice (3), plus the number of times it came up (2).

Sometimes your Combined Dice will give you a number that's higher than anything else you rolled. For example if you rolled four 3s and one 6, those 3s combine to become a 7. When this happens, use your Combined Dice to resolve the roll and ignore whatever high die would otherwise be the star of the show.

Now, there are some limits to Combining Dice. You can't Combine a single die with itself, so a single 2 isn't a 2 + 1. It's just a 2. Similarly, you can't build pyramids out of your numbers. If you roll two 2s and one 4, those 2s Combine to become a 4, but they don't Combine again with the other 4 you'd rolled to become a 6.

Even with these limitations, Combining Dice can send rolls into the stratosphere, allowing characters to achieve otherwise inaccessible Legendary TN 7 results.

A Quick Example Of Rolls

Hitoshi, a plucky youngster, wants to jump over a mossy log to get to the perfect spot on the edge of a pool---without slipping and falling in. The SB calls for a roll.

Hitoshi has the same 1d6 that everyone gets to roll, but he's also wearing Athletic Shoes, which give him another d6 in situations like this.

The log isn't especially easy to traverse, its body being old and crumbling and its handholds being slimy, so the SB sets the TN at 4, Normal.

Hitoshi rolls 2d6 and gets a pair of 1s. Two 1s Combined is 3 (1 + 2 copies), but this is just short of the TN, so the SB narrates a Setback.

Hitoshi lets out a yelp of surprise as he slithers too quickly over the log and plummets down the mossy embankment face-first into the pool.

Competing Against Other Characters

In most cases, if a Fisher is trying to do something and the environment or a non-player character is trying to stop them, determining who succeeds is simple. The SB sets the Target Number, and the Fisher rolls it.

So if Hitoshi gets into an arm-wrestling contest with a non-player-controlled villager, the SB might set the TN at 4 or 5 depending on how strong the other villager is, and then Hitoshi's player rolls as normal.



However, what happens if a Fisher competes against another Fisher?

If two or more player-controlled characters ever try to compete against each other, they both roll their dice, and whoever reaches the highest TN succeeds. In the event of a tie, the Fishers roll again. Any Fishers that lose this roll suffer a Setback as usual.

Teamwork Makes The Bream Work

Sometimes instead of competing with each other, two or more Fishers will combine their efforts to accomplish a task. This is called Teamwork.

Teamwork may only be used when there is time for the Fishers to plan and coordinate (so it is not available in the heat of battle), but when a Fisher begins a difficult task, up to two other Fishers may jump in and describe how they are helping. For each Fisher who helps this way, the Fisher who is rolling may ignore a single point of Stress or Exhaustion on their roll.

Again, up to two Fishers may help this way and Teamwork may not be used on rolls while in Fish Combat or Animal Combat. In combat, Fishers use Yell Encouragement instead.

Combat is a little different from regular gameplay, and it's covered in its own chapter, so if you're curious about what that above bit of information means, you can [skip ahead to page 56](#).

Exhaustion And Stress

Often a Setback will be a temporary complication that applies to a single situation, but sometimes a Setback will make it likely that the difficulty of future rolls is increased.

For example, after being dunked in the pond in the quick example, Hitoshi is probably no longer in the perfect mindset for a long duel of wits with the catfish that lives in the pool. His concentration's been broken, he's cold and shivering, and he's dropped his favorite hook in the pond.

The SB can reflect this kind of consequence by applying Exhaustion or Stress after a Setback.

Exhaustion is bad. Every point of Exhaustion increases the TN of a Fisher's rolls by 1. So a Fisher with 3 Exhaustion would treat an Easy (TN 3) roll as being Very Hard (TN 6) instead! Exhaustion generally only goes away when you Make Camp (more about that in a second), and if enough Exhaustion builds up it can become impossible for a Fisher to pass rolls at all.

Stress is less bad than Exhaustion, but it works in the same way. Every point of Stress increases the TN of a Fisher's rolls by 1. Luckily, unlike Exhaustion, Stress is only ever accumulated during combat, and all Stress goes away at the end of each combat.

Stress and Exhaustion can't permanently injure a character, but if enough of them build up a Fisher may become so frazzled that their only option is to storm off, cool down, and come back later.

And this is where Making Camp comes into play.



Making Camp And Resting

Sometimes a Fisher needs to take a break, get back their composure, and rest.

Making Camp allows them to do that.

A group of Fishers can Make Camp any time that they're not in the middle of a Fish Combat or Animal Combat.

When a group of Fishers Makes Camp, the following things happen in order.

- If the group has fewer total Snacks than the current number of Fishers, they gain Snacks until the group's total number of Snacks equals the number of Fishers.
- If the group has in their possession fish that can be exchanged for certain benefits (such as Snacks or Equipment) when they Make Camp, those fish can be exchanged now.
- Any Type-specific abilities related to Making Camp go off.
- All of the Fishers can **Rest**, clearing any points of Exhaustion that they have accumulated.

In many Scenarios, when the Fishers Make Camp, the group is also able to make contact with the Village. Sometimes this can mean sending a runner back, or calling a phone line, or even meeting a villager in the Old Region. This allows the Fishers to interact with other characters from the Village and maintain a strong bond with their home.

The Fishers can also encounter NPCs when they camp, and for more information about these encounters [see page 118](#).

In certain Scenarios, to create a sense of urgency, the number of times a group can Make Camp is limited. This is especially appropriate for Scenarios that are under some kind of time pressure (rescuing trapped miners, healing your ailing mother, etc). In these Scenarios, when the Make Camps are all used up, the Scenario can be failed. So if the Fishers get saddled with so many points of Exhaustion that it is no longer possible for them to win with the dice they have, and if their Make Camps are all used up, the Scenario is lost.

This is not the default way to play, but it adds drama and tension to the game, so some groups may prefer to have their Scenarios include limited Make Camps.





Creating Your Fisher

In this chapter, we cover how to create a Fisher.

Flipping Ahead

A lot of players may be itching to create their characters by this point, and if that describes you, you're welcome to dive right in.

However, if this is your first time reading the book, a number of entries here reference mechanics in the Fish Combat ([page 56](#)) and Animal Combat ([page 64](#)) chapters.

So if you find yourself needing to know more about a Stand Firm Roll, or Tagging Out, or anything similar, just know that you can flip over to Fish Combat or Animal Combat to read up on it.

This chapter will still be here when you get back.

Fisher Basics

The first thing we need to do when creating a Fisher is to establish what kind of person they are.

Come up with a name, age, gender, and profession for your Fisher (if your Fisher is old enough to be working a job), then connect your Fisher to someone in the Village that's been affected by the Tragedy.

If you just flipped randomly to this section and skipped some of the earlier ones, you should check out Designing Your World on [page 27](#) to figure out where your Village is located and what the Tragedy is.

If the Tragedy is that an earthquake has buried some locals in the mine outside of town and you're setting off to find the legendary earthquake catfish to put things right, maybe you're the son or wife of one of the miners. Or maybe you're the owner of the mine and you feel responsible. Or maybe you weren't able to work on the day of the collapse and it's your colleagues that are trapped down there. Either way, you should make sure your character cares about someone or something that's been affected by the Tragedy, since your connection to them gives you a reason to venture into the Old Region in search of the Fish Of Legend.

Once you've figured out who your Fisher is in the narrative, it's time for the crunchier part of character creation. You need to figure out your Fisher's Type, Temperament, and Kit. To do this, follow the steps in the next three sections.

