

YZN

YEAR ZERO: NANO

by Matt Kay

YEAR ZERO

E N G I N E

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INTRODUCTION

What You Need to Play

Players: 2-4 players are ideal, with one of them taking the role of Gamemaster (GM).

Imagination: You will all create a story together, not just follow some pre-determined plot. Tools are provided to make things easy for the GM.

Dice: YZN uses standard, six-sided dice (D6s). Each player should have five D6, plus one special D6 (the Wild Die) which looks different.

Tokens: Luck Points work best with tokens or poker chips. Jot down how much Luck you have at the end of a session.

Index Cards: These work best for character sheets and GM notes.

Inspiration

- [Year Zero Mini](#)
- [Tales From the Loop](#)
- [FATE Core](#)
- [Alas For the Awful Sea](#)
- [Abenteuerspiel](#)
- [Dreaming Dragonslayer Blog](#)

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YOUR CHARACTER

At each step, fill your character out on an index card. Leave a space at the top for your name, which you should come up with last.

Step 0: Your Group

Don't create your own character in a vacuum. Discuss a group concept with the other players first. Many settings will already have this baked in. Here are some examples:

- **Explorers** looking for artefacts.
- **Anarchists** undermining the authorities.
- **Entertainers** in a joyless land.
- **Aides** to the bumbling Galactic President.

Step 1: Concept

Your Concept describes who you are. To create one, come up with a **background** and **career**.

- **Background** should be 1-3 words describing roughly where you came from (e.g. *rural, working class, orphaned*).
- **Career** should be 1-3 words describing what you do for a living (e.g. *rat catcher, peasant, fighter pilot*).

Here are some examples:

- *Tunnelborn Dwarven Miner*
- *Working-Class Cockney Investigator*
- *Lowborn Malestolian Duellist*
- *Shipborn Nogov Slicer*

Step 2: Appearance

What do you look like? Keep it snappy:

- *Oil-smeared face, copper-rimmed goggles, flatcap.*
- *Tattooed with rabbit motifs, green stomping boots.*
- *Immaculate makeup, dressed in blood-red leather.*
- *Tall, dark-haired, filthy tartan dressing gown.*

Step 3: Traits

Come up with three things you are good at or that drive you. Examples:

- *Very strong*
- *True grit*
- *Calming presence*
- *Eyes in the back of your head*

Step 4: Flaw

What gets you into hot water? Examples:

- *Easily provoked*
- *Pyromaniac*
- *Overconfident*
- *Creepy*

Step 5: Gear

What two items are you carrying? These should fit with your *Concept* and *Traits*. Examples:

- *Small but savage dog*
- *Battered mountain bike*
- *Bullwhip*
- *Bath towel*

CORE RULES

Story First, Dice Second

Work together to keep the game flowing without referencing rules or character sheets.

Dice are only rolled when failure would be interesting.

Building the Dice Pool

If the GM asks you to make a roll, the number of dice you roll is determined by the following:

- Your first die is the **Wild Die** (see below).
- **Concept, Traits, Gear:** grab one die for each that apply. If something is perfectly suited to the task at hand, grab two dice instead.

The maximum size of your dice pool is 6D6.

The Wild Die

One of your dice looks differently to the others. This is the **Wild Die**, and it is *always* rolled.

The **Wild Die** is an *exploding die*, which means if you roll a success, you keep that success and get to roll it again. If the **Wild Die** rolls another success, you keep rolling until it stops rolling successes.

Success

You succeed if your **highest die is a 5 or 6**. Multiple successful dice means you succeed with style.

Otherwise you **fail** at what you were trying to do, or **succeed at a great cost** (the GM decides which). This might mean taking Conditions.

Modifiers

If something external is able to give you some kind of **advantage**, you succeed if the highest die rolled is a **4 or higher**.

If something external is putting you at a **disadvantage**, your **highest die needs to be a 6**.

Luck Points

You start the first (and only the first) session with **1 Luck Point**. Any unused Luck Points carry over between sessions.

You can spend a Luck Point to **reroll** (holding any dice you wish). You can only reroll once per roll.

To gain more Luck Points, you must act on your **Flaw(s)** to get into trouble or sacrifice something for your friends.

Knowledge

Recalling information can be very important to many settings (e.g. investigative horror). At other times, it can be important to know whether you recall something relevant to the scene you're in.

In YZN, you never roll to see if you know something. Instead, the GM uses these guidelines:

- **Common knowledge:** you know it unless there is some reason you shouldn't.
- **Specialist knowledge:** you know it if it is covered by your Concept.
- **Obscure knowledge:** you will need to find an expert or a resource relating to it.

Perception

Like Knowledge, you don't roll to see things. When there is something to be seen, the GM will use these guidelines based on how hidden the thing is:

- **Easily seen:** you see it unless there is some reason you shouldn't.
- **Obscured:** you partially see it - the GM gives you only hints of what you see.
- **Well-hidden:** you only see it if you are actively looking for something.

Advancement & Downtime

Downtime is any significant period of rest between adventures – not just a full night's sleep!

You can change your Concept, Traits, or Flaw to something more suitable during a period of downtime. After *significant* **story milestones**, you may gain *additional* Traits.

CONFLICT

Conflict is treated like any other event: the GM gives each of you a scene where appropriate.

Conditions

Any time you take physical or mental trauma, you receive a narrative **Condition** relating to it. The Conditions should increase in severity as you take more. Some example Conditions are *cuts and bruises, broken arm, furious, and scared*.

Your first Condition simply gets added to your sheet, but each time you add an additional Condition on your sheet, roll a single D6.

If you roll *under* the total number of Conditions you now have, you are **out of action** until you are healed or can otherwise recover.

If you are in *combat* with someone wishing you to kill you, you are **dead** unless the GM has more interesting things in store for your PC.

If one of your Conditions should hinder a roll (i.e. trying to climb a tree with a broken arm), the GM can choose from the following:

- The roll is made at disadvantage.
- Remove one or more dice from the pool. The Wild Die always remains, even if all other dice are removed.

Recovery

You recover from Conditions during Downtime. Let logic dictate whether they are removed with rest or renamed to reflect that they are healing.

Climactic Scenes

Some climactic moments in the story might call for more structure, where a single roll of the dice just won't be enough. In this case, each PC gets an opportunity to do their part, and the following structure is used to enact these Climactic Scenes:

1. **Stakes:** The GM explains what is at stake if you fail – usually a major story development.
2. **Magnitude:** The GM declares the number of successes needed to overcome the challenge:
 - **Normal difficulty:** 2x the number of PCs;
 - **Hard difficulty:** 3x the number of PCs;
 - **Nearly Impossible difficulty:** 4x the number of PCs.
3. **Plan:** The players come up with a plan. The GM can disallow anything unreasonable.
4. **Roll:** The players enact their plan, acting out their scenes in turn. Each success rolled counts towards the Magnitude.
5. **Outcome:** Compare the total number of successes against the Magnitude.
 - a. If you have less than half of the required successes, you have failed and the stakes are inflicted.
 - b. If you have half or more, you can “buy” additional successes by taking Conditions, until the Magnitude is reached. Decide on Conditions which match the action you took. Then roll a D6 to see if you were taken out. Just roll once, even if you took more than one Condition.

Climactic Scene Example

You and two friends are trying to put a ghost to rest in the ruins of an old country house. You've got all the supplies you need; now all you need is a plan. Each of you describe how you want to confront the ghost – one of you will draw its attention, one of you will sneak into the well to recover and salt its bones, and you will attack it with the silver sword you just bought. The GM determines that this is going to be **Hard**, requiring a total of 9 successes.

You take turns narrating how you confront the ghost, each making a relevant test and tying the results into your narrative:

Kri rolls 2 successes to get the ghost's attention, Pip rolls 2 successes to sneak into the well, but you only roll 1 success as you step out with your silver sword to keep it at bay.

Unfortunately, that is only a total of 5 successes. You discuss taking Conditions and decide it makes the most sense for everyone to take one based on fear at the sight of the ghost, and for you to take the remaining Condition as a physical injury while confronting the ghost head on.

The GM narrates how the ghost beats you down just as its remains are found and salted. As the ghost prepares a fatal blow on your downed body, it suddenly disappears.

The last thing you see before passing out from the pain is Pip punching the air in success.

GAMEMASTERING

YZN is a **player-facing** game, which means the players roll all the dice. This frees you up to focus on the story.

To Roll, Or Not to Roll

It's up to you to ensure that players don't roll for trivial things (doing simple tasks when there is no pressure involved). If failure wouldn't be interesting, simply say "yes" and move on.

The Stakes

Players sometimes need to know the stakes before they roll the dice. While this is usually obvious, always tell them if they might gain Conditions before they roll.

Concept Abuse & Clichés

Concepts are central to YZN. They encompass experience, training, and skillsets and can be used in every roll. Therefore, it's important to ensure they are not too generically useful.

A Concept should give everyone a clear idea of the skills that go with it. If it is too vague, encourage the player to try to be more specific.

Clichés should be embraced. Without skills, assumptions have to be made about what the PCs are capable of. **HOWEVER**, be mindful that stereotypes can easily offend, so try to steer players away from adding them to their Concepts.

Complications

When players fail a roll, something goes wrong and the players are at your mercy. The only thing you shouldn't say is "nothing happens". Failure should always have consequences.

Encourage the players to come up with a good complication together – it could be gaining a Condition or Flaw, losing something valuable, having to make a detour, or facing a new threat.

Quick NPCs

Creating NPCs spontaneously doesn't have to be hard. The key is focused prep. All you need to do is create a list of names, mannerisms, and appearances. When you need an NPC, simply look at the list below and select one of each.

Example Mannerisms	Example Appearances
Frequently says "you know?"	All the piercings
Whispers when attention is given	Dark rings under eyes
Refers to self in 3rd person	Crookedly broken nose
Loud and confident	Ostentatious hat
Sticks nose in everyone's business	Dirty, dishevelled clothes
Constantly cracking bad jokes	Dressed in all black

These two elements should give you enough meat to help you get into character. The final step is to work out Conditions and Special Traits.

NPC Conditions

Most NPCs should simply be taken out of action once they receive one or two Conditions.

For tougher characters, you can roll a D6 to see if they are taken out, just like with PCs.

Special Traits

Some challenges and NPCs should be significantly harder to beat. Give them one or more **Special Traits**, with a score of 2 or 3.

A Special Trait only comes into play if a roll is needed to overcome it, and this will largely depend on the approach the PCs take. Players need to roll a number of successes equal to the Special Trait score to overcome that obstacle.

If the players find a way around this Special Trait, it can be ignored. Here are some examples:

- **Fierce Beast 3** (a dragon);
- **Master Swordsman 3** (a famous fencer);
- **Metal Frame 2** (a robot);
- **Wild Currents 2** (a swift river).

Realistic Adversaries

Try to play NPCs as if they are real people who actually value their lives. If there is a fight and things aren't going their way, have the NPCs flee for their lives or beg for mercy.

Abstracting Wealth

Assume the PCs have enough money to afford things within their Concept and make a ruling if there is any uncertainty.

Be generous, even if your setting is poverty-stricken (working-class Victorian London or a post-apocalyptic land).

When players come across money in the setting, it is assumed that they'll spend the majority of it during Downtime. Increasing their wealth enough to alter their Concept is a significant achievement and shouldn't be accomplished without serious **long-term investment**.

Handling Downtime

Downtime is important as it not only gives the PCs time to recover, but also to learn from their experiences.

Add Downtime whenever the story needs an extended break. This could be between adventures or following a major setting event.

You can even treat long periods of travel as downtime events, though these can work quite well as regular scenes, too!

Low-Prep Sandboxes

As a Gamemaster of many years, I find that I have the most fun when doing less prep and giving more narrative control to the players. They're going to do their own thing anyway!

This is a huge topic and rather than providing heaps of advice on how to run a low-prep game here, I'll instead provide some excellent resources that cover this in much more depth.

The **first** is [Return of the Lazy Dungeon Master](#) by Michael E. Shea – a great book for GMs full of tips on how to do smarter prep.

The **second** (shameless plug!) is the first sandbox episode from the Mud & Blood podcast ([link](#)).

The **final** is a wealth of articles at the Alexandrian's [Gamemastery 101](#) series of blogposts.

That said, here are my tips for creating a low-prep sandbox:

1. Create or find a map for the region you will be playing in;
2. Populate that map with interesting locations;
3. Populate each location with at least one interesting NPC;
4. Create a handful of factions to create tension;
5. Create 1-3 conflicts to run in the background.

The key thing to note here is that each location, NPC, faction, and conflict should be written so that each element fits on a single index card. Avoid long sentences, and instead use bullets, tags, and keywords to help you quickly grab the info at the table.

Organic Villains

One thing every good game needs is a Villain.

After you've created the sandbox, an NPC might jump out at you as a worthy contender. However, a Villain may organically appear during play as your players interact with the game world.

Once you have identified a Villain, flesh them out as per the Quick NPC guidelines [above](#), giving them 2 Special Traits (one at 3, one at 2) as well as an ambition: something they are actively working towards in the background.

Like with PCs, you should roll a D6 for their Conditions until they are out of action.

Magical Powers

YZN is designed to play gritty games, where magic is usually absent or only in the hands of the elite. That said, if you do need magic, here are some recommendations for keeping it gritty:

- Include the power as an element of the Concept (*Background + Power + Career*).
- Avoid spelling out what can and can't be done with the power and encourage player imagination & creativity (*embrace "schools" of magic and avoid spell lists*).
- To use a power, Conditions need to be inflicted – the number of Conditions scaling with how powerful the spell is.
- A spell is always cast, but it requires a roll to cast as intended.
 - Failure means the spell is **miscast** (*the GM decides how*).
 - Success means the spell is cast as intended, plus Conditions can be cancelled out. Each success cancels one Condition (*including the first success!*).
- Allow Luck Points to offset Conditions, either at a 1:1 cost or at a cost of 2 Luck Points per Condition (*recommended*).
- **Optional:** allow very minor active use of powers at no cost.

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