

GAMBLER'S HEART

A Pen & Paper RPG by Dice Kapital

Gambler's Heart is a game of collective storytelling, about magical gamblers fighting to preserve the existence of chance in the universe. In a game of Gambler's Heart, everyone plays a Gambler, except one player who plays the Game Master, or 'GM'. The Gamblers are the protagonists of the story, while the GM is the arbiter of the rules, steward of the narrative, and also represents the in-story adversary of the Gamblers, named The CONTROL. This rulebook is broken into two sections: Gamblers and The GM. The 'Gamblers' section explains how to be a Gambler and the core rules of the game, and the 'The GM' section explains how the game is run.

You will need:

- A six-sided die
- A pencil and paper to take notes
- A set of five poker dice (these can be substituted for five six-sided dice, but it's not as cool)
- Lastly, some players! Gambler's Heart is best played with 4-5 people
- Two twenty-sided dice (optional)
- A poker face (also optional)

Gamblers

You are a Gambler, a player of games of luck and skill imbued with magical power, belonging to a cabal of the similarly-gifted waging a secret war to protect chance itself. Along with other Gamblers, you will embark upon Quests to thwart the sinister organisation known as The CONTROL. To do so, you will narrate your character's actions in a collective story told between the players, and bring your magic to bear to change fate.

As a Gambler, at some point in your past you played a game of poker with a magical entity, and won. Who you won a great victory over is a secret, recorded only by The High Ace, a magical 53rd card that exists in every deck that will only be revealed during Black Jacknarok. Keeping the loser a secret is vital to protecting your magic. For your winnings against the magical entity, you were given a sliver of their power, and were inducted into the Gamblers shortly after.

Flesh and Blood. Gamblers are, physically, ordinary humans, and have all their vulnerabilities and faults. When playing, to do anything ordinary you simply describe what you do, and the GM explains how it plays out.

Card Sharps. Gamblers are experts at card games and other skilled gambling games besides. Against ordinary people, Gamblers always win such games.

Secret Society. The Gamblers keep their magic hidden from the wider world, and want it to stay that way. You should do everything you can to prevent the secret of magic from being revealed. Thankfully, ordinary people have a habit of explaining away the impossible.

Spell Slingers. Gamblers can use their sliver of magic power to **Cast A Spell**, making anything they imagine become a reality. To be a spell slinger, you must do two things: **Make Your Soulcards** (a magical rune upon your soul) and **Choose your Patronage** (the nature of the entity you won your magic from). The significance of your Patronage is important when you **Invoke The Patron**, which is explained later.



Your Patron does not decide what kind of magic you can cast. A Gambler's magic can manifest in any way they imagine (although there are some limits, explained later). Instead, a Patron can enhance any spell you cast that fits within its theme.

Choose your Patronage (or roll a 1d6 to decide):

1. Death. You played the grim reaper himself, likely for the chance to keep living. Death patronage empowers killing (the 'how' is up to you) as well as influencing the passage to the afterlife, staying those about to pass on, and briefly returning the recently-dead to life.

2. Illusion. You played a fey or trickster spirit, likely not even realising until the final round. Illusion patronage (unsurprisingly) empowers creating illusions that affect any and all of the senses, either affecting everyone or specific people.

3. Elemental. You played an elemental spirit, such as the Four Winds, or Gaia. Elemental patronage empowers using the four natural elements of fire, air, earth, and water.

4. Transmutation. You played with a spirit of change, such as the American Spirit, or The Devil (who often plays cards while waiting at crossroads). Transmutation patronage empowers changing and transforming both physical objects and people's hearts and minds, as well as making objects move and teleport.

5. Time. You played Time itself, a close friend of Death. Time patronage empowers speeding up, slowing down, or even stopping time, as well as perceiving past and future events. Time travel is also possible, although highly dangerous - a Gambler's inherently chaotic power can easily cause them to travel into a diverging timestream and be stuck in a parallel reality.

6. Paragon. You played an embodiment of human perfection, perhaps a descendant of Heracles or Gilgamesh. Paragon patronage gives you the power to accomplish great (yet still human) feats, be they physical or mental, such as outrunning a speeding train, deflecting a bullet with a sword, or solving in only a moment a puzzle that could take weeks.

When you choose your Patronage, make a note of it and hide it somewhere. Don't show it to anyone else! If all the players agree, any Patronage above can be replaced with another of the players' design.

Make Your Soucard

There is an indelible rune upon your soul, formed when you were first granted magical power, named a Soucard. A Gambler's Soucard is a minor thing, only serving the purpose of giving players a bit extra to do, and allowing them to justify to the GM how their character is able to pull off a special feat without having to Cast A Spell.

A Soucard is made of two parts: Your Soul Royalty, and your Soul Suit. Your Soul Royalty gives you a minor magical effect that your Gambler can use at will, without having to Cast A Spell, and your Soul Suit gives your Gambler some non-magical abilities beyond what a typical person can do.

Choose a Soul Royalty:

King. Kings get a hint of the personality and history of the last person who played with any card deck they touch, also learning their name and where they were headed when they last touched the deck.

Queen. Queens can make objects no larger than a playing card disappear and reappear in their palms when that object is out of sight.

Jack. Jacks can make any person they give cigarettes or whiskey repay the favour, offering something of similar value in return. It does not have to be an object - it can be a story, a snippet of information, or so on. The person does not realise they are under this effect.

Ace. Aces can throw poker chips and playing cards with perfect accuracy, and with enough force to cut or bruise someone. They can also effortlessly catch airborne poker chips, playing cards, and other small objects.

Choose a Soul Suit:

Hearts. People whose Soul Suit is 'Hearts' are charismatic, easily capturing people's attention and convincing people with their words.

Diamonds. People whose Soul Suit is 'Diamonds' are athletic, skilled in running, climbing, jumping and so on.

Spades. People whose Soul Suit is 'Spades' are intelligent, possessing a great deal of knowledge and the ability to apply it.

Clubs. People whose Soul Suit is 'Clubs' are sneaky, not needing magic to pick locks, move stealthily, pickpocket, and do other roguish things.

Cast A Spell

A Gambler's spell can be almost anything, and can be accompanied by any kind of physical action. You might imbue a playing card with deathly power and fly it through someone's head. Or turn someone's thoughts into whiskey, drinking it to gain their memories. Even make it appear as if it is night by reaching up and unscrewing the sun like a lightbulb. How a Gambler Casts A Spell is up to them and their imagination. A Gambler can Cast A Spell at any time in the narrative, even as a split-second reaction. Spells are only confined by your perception, in a broad sense. You can't, for example, cast a spell to teleport the object you're hunting into your hands if you have no idea where it is. You could Cast A Spell to help find it though!

When a Gambler Casts A Spell, first they describe what they'd like to happen. Generally, the effects of the spell happen and resolve immediately as the spell is cast, but the GM can make an exception for spells whose effects endure if they wish. They then engage in a condensed game of poker with the GM, betting their **Fortune** on the result. Fortune is explained fully later - for now, think of it like poker chips.

Having heard the kind of spell the Gambler would like to cast, the GM determines the Initial Stake based on the magnitude of the spell's effect. The Initial Stake can be any number between 1 and 15, but the table below provides ballparked numbers the GM can use.

INITIAL STAKE	SPELL EFFECT MAGNITUDE
~4	MINOR - THE SPELL ONLY AFFECTS ONE OR TWO INDIVIDUALS, ONLY PRODUCES A MINOR EFFECT UNLIKELY TO BE NOTICED, ETC
~8	MEDIUM - THE SPELL HAS A LARGE EFFECT, EITHER AFFECTING A WHOLE ROOM OR BUILDING, OR A GROUP OF PEOPLE, ETC
~12	MAJOR - THE SPELL COULD ALTER THE ENTIRE COURSE OF THE QUEST, TAMPERS WITH THE FABRIC OF REALITY, ETC

The Gambler can then choose to go ahead with the spell if they accept the Initial Stake, or back out of casting the spell with no penalty. Gamblers can accept the Initial Stake even if it is higher than their current Fortune. If the Gambler decides to go ahead, they then roll the five poker dice and keep the results to themselves. These dice are called a Hand. At this point the Gambler can choose to reroll up to two dice in their Hand. They must accept the rerolled results, and continue to hide their Hand. At the same

time as this, the GM secretly rolls a six-sided die.

The Gambler then decides if they want to Raise, where they can increase the Stake to any number up to double its current value. The Gambler cannot Raise to a number above their current Fortune.

The GM then decides if they want to Match, where they commit to the current Stake, or Raise, increasing the Stake to any number up to double its current value.

The Gambler and the GM cannot Raise beyond their current Fortune. If the Stake is higher than the GM's current Fortune, the GM Matches with what Fortune they have.

The Gambler or the GM can then choose to Fold. If the Gambler Folds, their spell does not manifest as they deliberately prevent it from manifesting. If the GM Folds, the spell happens as the Gambler described. Regardless, the player who Folds loses Fortune equal to half the current Stake (rounded up).

If neither player Folded, both then reveal their rolls. Using the table below, if the Gambler rolled a Hand whose Point Value is equal to or higher than the number on the GM's six-sided die, the Gambler has won this round. The spell is cast, and unless the GM Folded, the Gamblers gain Fortune equal to the Stake.

If the GM's die has a higher number, the GM wins this round. Unless the Gambler Folded, the GM gains Fortune equal to the current Stake, and the spell fails to happen. In addition, that Gambler cannot cast that spell or a spell too similar in design again for the duration of the Quest.

HAND	POINT VALUE
FIVE OF A KIND	6
FOUR OF A KIND	5
FULL HOUSE (A PAIR AND THREE OF A KIND)	4
THREE OF A KIND	3
TWO PAIRS	2
ONE PAIR	1
NOTHING - THIS HAND WILL ALWAYS LOSE UNLESS THE GM FOLDS	0

Invoke The Patron & IMPOSE Fortune

ORDER

Immediately after the Gambler and the GM reveal their dice rolls, and before either has lost Fortune and the outcome of the spell is decided, the Gambler can choose to Invoke The Patron, enhancing the magic of the spell to potentially overwhelm the winds of fate.

When they do so, the Gambler names any Patronage they choose and explains how that Patronage is relevant to the spell being cast. You must choose the Patronage most relevant to the spell. For example, the Elemental Patronage would be relevant to creating a great gust of wind. If the GM accepts the Patron's relevance, the Gambler can change one dice in their Hand to any other face, likely changing the Point Value of their Hand, potentially winning the round.

The Gambler can lie about their Patronage - indeed it is in their interest to do so, as the dice tend in favour of the GM unless the Gamblers use their patrons. However, whenever a Gambler uses Invoke The Patron, the GM can choose to IMPOSE ORDER in response, potentially bringing a curse of METATRON upon the Gambler. When the GM chooses to IMPOSE ORDER, the Gambler reveals their Patronage. If they lied about their Patronage, they become CURSED. The spell they are trying to cast fails and they count as having lost the round (causing them to lose Fortune equal to the Stake to the GM), and a CURSED Gambler has their magic bound by METATRON, making them unable to Cast A Spell again (there is a way out of this at the end of a Quest). They can still act within the narrative, and use the abilities of their Soulcard.

If a Gambler reveals their Patronage and it turns out they didn't lie, they instead are BLESSED. The Gambler wins the round, with the spell being cast and the GM losing Fortune equal to the Stake. A BLESSED Gambler cannot Invoke The Patron for the rest of the Quest, and can only Cast A Spell relevant to their Patronage. However whenever they do Cast A Spell, the GM rolls their six-sided die that the Gambler's Hand matches against in public view. At the end of a Quest, a BLESSED Gambler secretly decides on a new Patronage and loses the effect of BLESSED.

Fortune represents the scales of fate tilting in favour of either the Gamblers or The CONTROL.

There is always exactly 40 points of Fortune in play, never more or less. The Gamblers start with 20, which is shared between them all, and the GM starts with the other 20. Fortune cannot go below 0 for either side. If at any point either the Gamblers or the GM gain or lose Fortune, it is inversely lost or gained by the other. You can use two twenty-sided dice to represent the current Fortune held by the Gamblers. For example, if at one point the Gamblers have 25 Fortune, the GM therefore has 15 Fortune. If the Gamblers then lose 2 Fortune, their Fortune decreases to 23 and the GM's Fortune increases to 17.

If at any point the Gamblers Cast A Spell and the GM has 0 Fortune, that spell automatically succeeds without having to gamble Fortune. The GM having 0 Fortune is a great opportunity for the Gamblers to cast a powerful spell with no risk! Once the Gamblers have Cast A Spell this way, the GM's Fortune rises to 10 and the Gamblers' lowers to 30.

If at any point the Gamblers' Fortune becomes 0, disaster strikes! The Gambler who is the focus of the narrative at the point when their Fortune becomes 0 is removed from the narrative, either because they are killed, captured by The CONTROL, or by some other narrative device. If there is another Gambler who is CURSED when this happens, they can make a **Sacrifice Play**, giving up their life to save the Gambler who would otherwise suffer the consequences. The Gambler making the Sacrifice Play decides how it plays out - they might dive in front of a bullet, or create a distraction that costs their life, or give their last shred of magic to another Gambler and cease to be.

Regardless, whenever a Gambler is lost due to their Fortune becoming 0, afterwards the Gamblers' Fortune becomes 10, and the GM's lowers to 30.



Fortune's Favour

If a player comes up with a particularly creative idea, role plays in a way that is fun and engaging, or otherwise plays the game in a way that enhances the experience for everyone, the GM can reward them by increasing the Gambler's Fortune by 1.

This is a way to create an incentive for players to put their all into the game. If the players are already committed to the game and giving it their all, this rule can be ignored.

Flashbacks

Throughout a Quest, the Gamblers can choose at any point to have a **Flashback**, where they flash back to their travel to the Quest location and discuss in the past what they're going to do in the present.

Flashbacks are useful as it allows the Gamblers to not get mired in planning before they begin their Quest, and can instead get straight into the narrative. Players should use this mechanic in earnest, and it should not be used to circumvent situations that are beyond the realm of prediction. The GM can veto a Flashback if it is being abused.

Showdown

A Gambler falls through the floor into a room full of mobsters. The sniper, having found his mark, trains his sights on the Gamblers and squeezes the trigger. The doors seal and the room begins to fill with gas. These are all examples of Showdowns, narrative moments where at least one Gambler is about to go down irrespective of the Fortune score.

When a Showdown happens, the GM lets each of the Gamblers involved cast one spell each to try to resolve the Showdown in their favour. The outcome of the Showdown can resolve in a number of ways:

If the spells cast get the Gamblers out of the Showdown:

If between them the Gamblers manage to cast spells that resolve the Showdown with none of them in peril, the narrative continues as normal.

If the spells cast fail to get the Gamblers out of the Showdown:

If, after each Gambler involved in the Showdown has cast their one spell, the peril of the Showdown is still threatening at least one Gambler, then those Gamblers under threat suffer the consequences and are removed from the narrative as if the Gambler's Fortune had been reduced to 0.

If the Gambler's Fortune is below 10 when this happens, it is reset to 10.

If the Gamblers' Fortune hits 0:

If during one of the spells cast in response to the Showdown the Gambler's Fortune is reduced to 0, the Gambler most in danger is removed from the narrative, in accordance with the normal rules of the Gamblers' Fortune being reduced to 0.

Then, depending on the narrative circumstance, the loss of this Gambler resolves the Showdown or delays it. If it only delays it, the remaining Gamblers who haven't cast a spell will need to use their spells to resolve the Showdown.

If the GM's Fortune hits 0:

If the GM's Fortune is reduced to 0, a Gambler narrates how the automatically-successful spell resolves the Showdown. This spell acts in accordance with the normal rules of when you Cast A Spell and the GM has 0 Fortune.

The GM

The Game Master provides the narrative frame for the Gamblers, and narrates the consequences of their actions. They describe the scene the Gamblers are entering, perform the non-player characters the Gamblers meet, and wrap up the narrative at the end. Games of Gambler's Heart are broken up into Quests, the structure of which is explained in **Running a Quest** to the right.

In Gambler's Heart, whenever a Gambler wants to do something ordinary and non-magical, you as the GM simply allow them to dictate what their character does, and you explain the narrative consequences of those actions. Sometimes, a Gambler might bring up their Soucard to justify doing something a bit more outlandish. If a Gambler ever wants to do something you as GM think is beyond their normal abilities, explain that their desired course of action will require them to Cast A Spell.

The GM also represents The CONTROL, a shadowy government organisation looking to remove all sources of chance ('chaos' to them) from reality, including free will. Like the Gamblers, The CONTROL also has an interest in remaining hidden - the reveal of their existence would create more of the chaos they despise. It is only mutually assured destruction that prevents one side from revealing the existence of the other. Although they have no access to the magic of the Gamblers, agents of The CONTROL can have mystical blessings from their Director METATRON, who is always watching, waiting to IMPOSE ORDER upon the Gamblers.

Tip the Scales of Fate

At the end of a Quest, if Gamblers have 30 or more Fortune, they can use their abundance of luck to change the past. When the Gamblers Tip the Scales of Fate, there are two options:

- If a Gambler was lost when their Fortune was reduced to 0, you can alter fate to have them somehow returned, having miraculously survived, (returning Gamblers are not CURSED, and choose a new Patronage if it was revealed)
- If a Gambler is CURSED, they can be freed from it. That Gambler secretly rolls a d6 to determine a new Patronage, as their past is rewritten to change their present.

Running a Quest

Act 1 - The Introduction

The Portent. The GM narrates the objective of this session. The Gamblers have read the cards and discovered The CONTROL has some nefarious plan they are now on their way to stop.

The Crew. All the other players introduce their Gambler to the rest of the group if they haven't done so previously, and have any introductory inter-character dialogue.

Arrival. The Gamblers arrive and the GM sets the scene.

Act 2 - The Plan

The Work Begins. The Gamblers get to work pursuing their objective.

Flashback. At any point, the Gamblers can retroactively plan out their actions by losing 2 Fortune, and the narrative flashes back to the Gamblers travelling to the location and discussing their plan.

Act 3 - The Conflict

Forces Collide. Agents of The CONTROL clash with the Gamblers. The triggering event may be the Gamblers tripping an alarm, or launching an attack, or otherwise making their presence known.

Victory/Defeat. The Gamblers either succeed in their objective or don't. If they failed, the GM uses their total Fortune to influence the outcome. If the Gamblers have 30+ Fortune, the outcome is less awful than anticipated. If the Gamblers have 10 or less Fortune, the outcome is even worse than anticipated.

Resolution. The Gamblers depart for their next quest as the story is resolved. If the Gamblers have 30+ Fortune, they can **Tip The Scales Of Fate**. If they do so, the Gamblers' Fortune becomes 20.

Onto the next Quest

When The Gamblers move onto their next quest, their Fortune carries over from the previous quest.

Repatronage. To ward against METATRON's suspicions, Gamblers can choose another Patronage at the start of a Quest, having sought out and played a game of cards against another magical entity in-between Quests.

Simulating Random Chance

Generally the outcome of the Gamblers' actions is decided by the process of casting a spell, or the GM simply dictating how their actions resolve. However if the GM ever needs to simulate random chance they can roll a six-sided die and consult the table below to determine the result.

If what's being rolled for is a situation where it seems very likely to come out in favour of the Gamblers, the GM can roll twice and pick the higher roll. If inversely it seems very likely to come out not in favour of the Gamblers, the GM can roll twice and pick the lower roll.

DICE ROLL	OUTCOME
1	EXTREMELY UNLUCKY. THE WORST CASE SCENARIO FOR THE GAMBLER(S) HAPPENS.
2-3	UNLUCKY. A BAD OUTCOME FOR THE GAMBLER(S) HAPPENS.
4-5	LUCKY. A GOOD OUTCOME FOR THE GAMBLER(S) HAPPENS.
6	EXTREMELY LUCKY. THE BEST CASE SCENARIO FOR THE GAMBLER(S) HAPPENS.

Quest Ideas

Gambler's Heart is a game of dusty, vagabond gamblers in a world where magic is just beyond the corner of the ordinary person's eye. The *Preacher* comics by Garth Ennis can be a good touchstone for Gambler's Heart, as can the book *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman. Country and Blues music can help set the mood, such as that by Johnny Cash and Muddy Waters.

The CONTROL is mainly inspired by the Men In Black conspiracy theories (not the films with Will Smith), as well as the real-world evil of the CIA (although in Gambler's Heart the shadowy organisation serves the interests of an angel obsessed with order, rather than fruit companies and white supremacists). CONTROL agents know of the magical abilities of the Gamblers, and will try to use countermeasures, such as concealing their identity or using magical objects.

Credits

Writing and design by Liam Hevey.

Playtested by Alexis Friday,
Daniel Clarke, Harry Robertson,
Sam Stafford, and Shannon Kelly.



The Gamblers are travelling to...

1. *A grand casino*
2. *A dusty old town*
3. *An old church, tucked away in the city*
4. *A secret army base within a mountain*
5. *A luxury motel, with a few secrets of its own*
6. *The city docks*

...because they've learned The CONTROL plans to use...

1. *A cursed deck of tarot cards*
2. *An expert assassin*
3. *A trapped spirit of fire*
4. *A briefcase full of Nazi gold*
5. *A secret society of wealthy assholes*
6. *A single angel-feather, brimming with power*

...in or around the location in order to...

1. *Steal the election.*
2. *Expand their wealth.*
3. *Rob the community of their free will.*
4. *Manipulate and control a local leader.*
5. *Disappear someone who will otherwise do great things in the future.*
6. *Destroy an object that gives people hope.*

The lead CONTROL agent on site is...

1. *A threatening loose-cannon*
2. *A manipulator and negotiator*
3. *A cold-blooded killer*
4. *A charismatic charmer*
5. *A master of disguise*
6. *An intellectual*

...who has...

1. *A blessed coin, that while worn wards against magic directly affecting the agent.*
2. *Saint George's holy sword, sanctified by the blood of a dragon, which cuts through magic.*
3. *Prodigious skill in surgery, which can alter faces and hide objects in people.*
4. *Incredibly acute senses, enabling them to see and hear at great distances.*
5. *A terrifying face, which paralyzes with fear anyone who sees it.*
6. *Incredible skill in firearms, even able to intentionally hit someone with a ricochet.*