

# Dangerous Ideas

## The RPG

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In Dangerous Ideas, you and your friends will portray competing philosophies, vying for control of a familiar story. As a group, you will re-tell the story from your different perspectives. When the story ends, one philosophy will win out, and the moral of the story will be revealed.

**The Character Sheet:** The success and failure of your philosophy will be tracked on your character sheet as you play the game as you gain (and spend) power, and create new memes. The more power your ideas represent, the better able you are to affect the course of the story. The more memes you have, the closer you are to winning the game.

**Power:** The power of ideas is represented by stones. Ideally, each person would have their own color of stones they could use for the game. Barring that, the players should use two colors of stones or tokens: one color for the players, and one color for bonuses. When a player earns a point of power, they place a stone on a node (one of the five of “Think”, “Probe”, “Defend”, “Connect”, and “Create”), or on an active meme branch (a branch with a meme written on it).

**Setup:** Everyone chooses a Dangerous Idea to play. Dangerous ideas should be broad enough to encompass several specific truths (or truisms), which will enter the game as ‘memes’. For example, one player might play ‘Manifest Destiny’, with memes of ‘one area should have one ruler’ and ‘white men are superior’. Another player might play ‘Man is the Measure of All Things’, with memes of ‘a tree that falls in a forest makes no sound’ and ‘science should be funded in accordance with its usefulness’. If the group wishes, everyone can play the same kind of thing—different religions, the perspectives of different animals, or different management philosophies.

The group should also decide on a story to re-tell through the lens of these competing ideas. Good choices for stories are fairy tales or nursery stories: ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, ‘Sleeping Beauty’, ‘Puss in Boots’ and so on. For a longer game, players may wish to re-tell the plot of a movie everyone has watched. Everyone should be familiar (or be made familiar) with at least the basic plot of the story at the beginning of the game.

**For example: Manifest Destiny, Vegetarianism, and German Efficiency are re-telling the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears.**

**Manifest Destiny begins:** “Once upon a time there was a little girl named Goldilocks. Goldilocks knew that one day she and her family would own all of the dark forest that grew next to their cottage at the edge of the field.” She writes down ‘Humans will one day own the forest - Goldilocks’ on a coiled branch on her sheet, and adds a stone to that branch. She continues, “She would often wander through the woods, imagining in her head where the new telegraph wires would go.” She writes down, “The woods could use some good telegraph wires - Goldilocks’ on a leaf branch on her sheet, and adds another stone.

**Vegetarianism continues:** “In the forest lived three bears: Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and Baby Bear. Mama Bear always served her family porridge for breakfast, and never animal products like bacon and eggs. He writes “Porridge for breakfast is healthy - Mama Bear’ on a coiled meme on his sheet, adds a stone, and continues, “Goldilocks had seen the bears in the forest before, and had convinced her father not to hunt them, because she knew that bears are just like people.” He writes, “Bears are friends, not food - Goldilocks,” on a leaf meme, and adds his second stone.

**And finally, German Efficiency:** “Papa Bear knew that exercise was healthy, so every day at exactly 9:00 in the morning, he would gather his family together and they would go for a walk.” He writes down, ‘Punctual exercise is an important part of the day - Papa Bear’ on a leaf meme and adds a stone to it. “Baby Bear’s job was to keep their house clean, and always knew exactly where everything was,” he continues, and writes, “Everything has its place - Baby Bear” on a coiled meme and adds a second stone.

Everyone then gets 7 stones, which they distribute to the five nodes on their character sheets (“Think”, “Probe”, “Defend”, “Connect”, and “Create”).

Everyone sits in a circle. Whoever's idea it was to play the game goes first.

**The Setting Round:** Everyone now gets to fill out two branches on their sheet with a meme (a basic belief that fits under the general philosophy of your Dangerous Idea), and the name of a character in the story that holds that belief. You may fill in one meme of both types, anywhere on your sheet. 'Leaf' memes have leaves on the branches, and are beliefs that others tend to notice about the character. 'Coiled' memes generally have coils on the ends (though one has nothing), and are beliefs the characters hold more internally.

As you fill these out, you narrate the setting of the story, telling a little bit about the characters and the beliefs you've chosen. You then place one stone of your color on each of your two memes.

In the setup (and in general) it is fine to have your memes held by as few or as many characters as you wish. In addition, more than one player may have memes held by the same character in the story.

**The Story Rounds:** The story is told in a series of chapters. In each chapter, everyone will get a turn, and on each person's turn, everyone else will get a chance to help or hinder that person. The person who started announces the chapter and a one-sentence synopsis of what actions will happen during it ("Chapter 1: In which Red Riding Hood's mother discovers Grandmother is sick, and sends Red off with a basket of goodies.")

Then, starting with the person to the first player's left, each player **gains two stones** which they may place anywhere, and may **attempt two actions**. Possible actions are:

Power actions:

- Gain three stones to place anywhere.
- Move power around. Each stone on the sheet may be moved one space to an adjoining node: meme stones to hub trait nodes, hub traits stones to adjacent meme nodes or the 'think' node, and 'think' node stones to the hub trait nodes. If you want to move a stone two spaces (say, from a meme to the 'think' node, or from one hub trait node to another), you must use two actions to do it.

Meme actions:

- **Create** a new meme to be held by a character in the story.
- Use your **Probe** power to spread one of your memes from one character in the story to another.

You may additionally attempt to **replace** someone else's meme with one of your own as part of a Create or Probe action. If you are successful, the other player must cross their meme off of their character sheet (leaving it blank again), and you write down your new meme on your own empty branches.

Meme actions don't happen in a vacuum—all the other players will have an opportunity to help you (**Connect**) or hinder you (**Defend**) in your attempt.

Any of these actions may be performed in any order, and the same type of action may be attempted twice. The two actions may not, however, involve any of the same memes from your sheet. You may also not attempt to replace the same meme twice.

During a Power action, the narrative does not advance. Meme actions, however, are accompanied by the players narrating something happening in the story. The action in the scene may not advance beyond what was previously announced in the chapter title, but the given actions can be expounded upon, and there is plenty of room for dialog, asides, flashbacks, internal musings, and incidental actions.

Additionally, at the beginning of every chapter, everyone refreshes their bonus stones by making sure they have two stones of a different color on every filled-in meme on their character sheet (to distinguish them from the player's normal stones). During the course of the chapter, you may spend one of these bonus stones when you involve the meme in the action if you haven't already spent a bonus stone from that meme during the current player's turn already.

### **Phase 1:**

To begin any meme action, you announce what meme you wish to create or spread, and which character will hold it. A newly created meme must not yet exist on your sheet, and you must have a meme at least once on your sheet already before you can spread it. If you are attempting to replace a meme, you must announce which meme you are attempting to replace. A meme may not spread to a character who already holds it.

You then spend stones to help your action succeed by placing them in the center of the table. The more stones you spend, the more likely your action is to succeed: you will roll 2d6, trying to get less than or equal to the number of stones you and your allies have spent, less the number of stones any opposed players have spent. You may spend stones from the 'Probe' node when spreading a meme, or from the 'Create' node when creating a new meme. You may also spend as many stones from your central 'Think' node as you spent from the 'Probe' or 'Create' node.

After you spend the stones, you then narrate a piece of the story. Since at this point we don't know whether your action will succeed or fail, the narration should be speculative in nature. It wouldn't work to say "Little Red Riding Hood walked by the river, and decided she didn't like water." Instead, say something like, "As Little Red Riding Hood walked by the river, she saw how the nearby rocks were very slippery, and thought about how cold she would be should she slip and fall in. She wondered to herself if water was really as wonderful as she had been told."

You may also choose to involve other memes on your sheet. A Create action may be assisted by any coiled meme you own, while a Probe action may be assisted by any leaf meme you own. (The internally-held coiled memes tend to be more thought-provoking, which fosters new ideas; the externally-displayed leaf memes make it easier for others to pick up those and related ideas.) Because a Probe action will duplicate one or more of your existing memes (if successful, you will end up with a duplicate meme on a new branch held by a different character) all of these memes may also be involved, regardless of type.

### **Later, that same game...**

It's Manifest Destiny's turn during the chapter "In Which The Bears Return To Find Their Porridge Eaten." She gains 2 stones, which she places on 'Probe'. As her first action, she chooses to move stones around. She moves 4 stones from 'Think' to 'Probe' (joining 2 stones already there), 2 stones from 'Connect' to 'Think', and one stone from 'Create' to the connected coiled meme, "Important decisions should be made through democracy - Mama Bear". She decides that more of the bears should believe in democracy, so she announces that she is attempting to spread his democracy meme to Papa Bear. In addition, she decides this will be an attempt to replace German Efficiency's 'Punctual exercise is important - Papa Bear' meme. She spends the 6 stones from Probe and 2 stones from Think, and narrates.

"When the three bears returned to their house, Papa Bear saw immediately that something was wrong. He stood in the doorway to their house, ready to make an autocratic announcement, when he paused. Perhaps the whole family should be involved? 'Gracious,' Papa Bear thought to himself. 'If this sort of thing can happen when we're away, perhaps getting exercise isn't as important as I supposed!'"

Now Manifest Destiny brings in the meme she wants to spread. She spends one of the bonus stones from that meme (since it is the subject of the action, it doesn't matter that it's not a leaf meme), and also spends the stone she just moved onto it. She narrates,

"Mama Bear brushed past him into the house. Seeing the state of things and the look on Papa Bear's face, she declared, 'Something here is wrong. The best way to find out quickly will be if we all participate equally, and discuss things together before making hasty decisions. Papa Bear, what do **you** see?'"

Manifest Destiny now has a 10-stone pool in the center of the table, and it's everyone else's turn to join in.

When you involve a meme in an action, you may spend one of the bonus stones on that meme (if any remain), as well as any stones of your color currently sitting on that meme. Each meme may be involved in only one of your two actions.

When involving an existing meme, that meme (and its owner) must be brought in as part of the narration. If Vegetarianism was trying to spread ‘Porridge is healthy’ from Mama Bear to Goldilocks, he would spend stones from that meme, gain his bonus stone, and say something like, “Goldilocks entered the house and immediately smelled the delicious porridge. ‘Why,’ she exclaimed, ‘there’s no bacon to go with this breakfast! Perhaps porridge is so good, you don’t need bacon!’”

## Phase 2:

Now other players may choose to involve their own philosophies in the musings of the target character. Like the main player, they spend stones and bonus stones when they do this. They may choose to either **Connect** with the new meme, or **Defend** against it. When they spend stones to connect, they add their stones to the total in the center of the table. When they spend a stone to defend, they take their stone and a stone from the center of the table, and discard them both. Any player may either Connect or Defend, but may not do both.

Players spend stones from their Connect or Defend nodes as appropriate, and may supplement with an equal number of stones from the central ‘Think’ node. They, too, may also involve memes from their own sheet. If they are connecting, they may involve coiled nodes, as introspection reveals previously unrealized similarities between the two philosophies. If they are defending, they may involve leaf nodes, as the displayed memes serve as a warning to the characters to not fall under the sway of erroneous philosophies. As in the main player’s case, the other players may spend one bonus stone from any involved meme, along with any number of their own stones from it.

A player whose meme has been targeted to be replaced nevertheless may still choose whether to Connect (should they feel it’s a hopeless cause) or Defend. Should they defend, the targeted meme and any other meme held by the target character may be involved, regardless of meme type. In addition, any stones spent from the targeted meme count double: remove an additional stone from the center of the table for every player’s stone and bonus stone spent.

German Efficiency has already used his ‘punctual exercise’ meme once this chapter, but still has a bonus stone left, which he spends, removing 2 stones from Manifest Destiny’s pool. He narrates:

“Papa Bear shook his head and flexed his muscles. ‘Surely,’ he thought, ‘my exercise will have prepared me for this incursion, whatever it turns out to be.’”

He has 5 stones on ‘Think’, but only one on ‘Defend’, so he grits his teeth and spends the one from Defend plus one matching from Think, removing only 2 more stones from the pool. Again, he narrates:

“Papa Bear grumbled at Mama Bear’s suggestion. ‘What I see is that someone has broken into our house, and has been eating from my bowl! We can all participate, but I should be the one to tell people what to do. The culprit could be escaping while we dither and discuss!’”

He has no other memes held by Papa Bear, but he does have one other leaf meme, “Try everything once - Goldilocks”. He has one of his own stones on this meme, and hasn’t used it yet this chapter, so it still has both its bonus stones. He spends the bonus stone (he can’t spend them both at once—they can only be used on different people’s turns) and his own stone, and narrates:

“Papa bear surveyed the house, mumbling to himself. He could clearly see that each of their bowls of porridge had been sampled, and could see disturbed furniture in the next room. Surely he could see how best to deal with the incursion, without having to discuss everything with his family *ad nauseum* first!”

With the pool now at 6, Vegetarianism decides to weigh in. Since German Efficiency is in the lead, he decides to help out Manifest Destiny. With nothing left on Connect, he instead spends one bonus stone from each of his coiled memes, “Porridge is healthy - Mama Bear” and “Treat all living things with respect - Baby Bear,” bringing the total to 8. He narrates for each:

“Well, someone has been eating from my bowl, too, which shows that whoever it is at least knows the value of a good meal. You’re being too harsh, Papa Bear—you clearly need my input to better see the big picture.’ Then Baby Bear piped up, ‘Someone’s been eating from my bowl, and has eaten it all up! Whoever it is must be starving! Please, Papa Bear, can’t we try to help?’”

All players (including the player whose turn it is) may spend more stones and involve new memes in any order during this phase of the action. Every time they do, they add to the story, explaining why the target character feels more or less inclined to adopt the new belief. Now other players may choose to involve their own philosophies in the musings of the target character. Like the main player, they spend stones and bonus stones when they do this. They may choose to either Connect with the new meme, or Defend against it. When they spend stones to connect, they add their stones to the total in the center of the table. When they spend a stone to defend, they take their stone and a stone from the center of the table, and discard them both. Any player may either Connect or Defend, but may not do both.

Players spend stones from their Connect or Defend nodes as appropriate, and may supplement with an equal number of stones from the central ‘Think’ node. They, too, may also involve memes from their own sheet. If they are connecting, they may involve coiled nodes, as introspection reveals previously unrealized similarities between the two philosophies. If they are defending, they may involve leaf nodes, as the displayed memes serve as a warning to the characters to not fall under the sway of erroneous philosophies. As in the main player’s case, the other players may spend one bonus stone from any involved meme, along with any number of their own stones from it.

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### Phase 3:

Once everyone agrees they do not wish to spend any more stones, we determine whether the action succeeded. Add up all the stones left in the center of the table: this is the target number. You then roll two d6’s. If the total is 11 or 12, the action fails. Otherwise, if the total is equal to or less than the target number, the action succeeds.

If any player is unhappy with the results of a die roll, they may spend one of the seven red seeds shown on their character sheet to force a re-roll of one die (that player’s choice). The die is re-rolled, and they must cross off one of the seeds from their sheet. This can continue as long as people have seeds left.

The pool stands at 8 stones, and Manifest Destiny rolls the dice. She rolls a 4 and a 6--too high! She goes ahead and spends a seed to re-roll the 6 (crossing it off her sheet), and gets another 4, which is exactly low enough. German Efficiency considers spending a seed of his own, but with only a 1/3 chance of success (and seeing several seeds left on Manifest Destiny’s sheet), he decides to save his seeds for another time. Manifest Destiny narrates the outcome:

“Papa Bear shook his head. “You two are right,” he sighed, “I’ve been too caught up in the daily routine, and haven’t been paying attention to your wonderful insights. From now on, we make decisions as a family—together, or not at all!”

She writes down “Important decisions should be made through democracy - Papa Bear’ on a free branch on her sheet, and adds one stone of her color and two bonus stones to it, while German Efficiency crosses off ‘punctual exercise’ from his own. Vegetarianism adds two stones of his color to his Think node, and play passes to the left.

If the action is successful in the end, write down your new meme on any empty branch on your character sheet, put one new stone of your color and two bonus stones (for the chapter) on it, and transfer any number of stones from the adjoining node to the new meme. If you successfully replaced another player’s meme, that player crosses that meme off of their own sheet and moves any remaining stones from that branch to the adjoining node. That branch is then empty, and new memes may be created on it as normal.

Any player who connected with your successful action (even if only to contribute bonus stones) receives two stones of their color which are placed on their 'Think' node. Players who assisted a successful defense against your action gain nothing more than the satisfaction of knowing that your heretical ideas have failed to spread.

Whether you succeeded or failed, you then narrate what happened in the character's mind to cause them to accept or reject the new idea.

### **Finishing up:**

At the end of your second action, you pass the dice to the person on your left, and the next person takes their turn.

The player who announced the chapter title will be the last person to make their actions in that chapter. If the actions described in the chapter title have not been completed by the time it is their turn again, they narrate any remaining plot at the end of their turn. Then everyone refreshes their bonus stones, and the next person announces the next chapter title.

The story should be divided up into about 5-10 chapters: if playing with 3-4 people, everyone should start a round twice, and if playing with 5-10 people, everyone should start a round once (decide before you begin the game). You may want to divvy up the plot into sections before you start, or you can just wing it and lump any remaining plot into the last chapter.

#### **Optional rule: New choice!**

At some point during the game, you may decide that someone's narrated justification for spending stones was weak. Or you may just want to see what else they can come up with. If this is the case, you can call out 'New Choice!' and the player must back up and re-narrate the reason why their stone-spending was justified. This has no mechanical influence on the game—just have fun with it.

At the end of the story, everyone totals their score to see who won. Points are awarded as follows:

- Unique memes: 4 points.
- Groups of identical memes: 4 points per group, plus one point per meme in the group.

If there is a tie, the person with the greatest total of stones plus unspent red seeds wins. If there is still a tie, it's a tie.

The winner (or winners) then get to announce the moral of the story! They should feel free to incorporate any memes from their sheet, and to belittle any memes from others.

It is technically possible in a game with a lot of chapters that someone will fill up their sheet with all twelve memes before the end of the story. If this happens, tally up everyone's points at the end of the current chapter, and the winner gets to narrate the end of the story as well as the moral.

And now you know what the story is really all about.

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*Special thanks to Dan Shiovitz and Jota for playtesting and suggestions. Thanks also go to Paul Czege who not only provided the sheet as part of the contest, but once I found his original dangerous idea, I knew I had the title for the game. Any resemblance between this game and Steve Jackson's Illuminati is, well, probably to be expected. And while we're giving credit, I'll say that various Improv games have strongly influenced the game's philosophy, where the rules are there to provide inspiration for creativity, but otherwise don't really matter.*

## Summary:

### **Stones of your color are gained:**

- 7 stones placed anywhere at the beginning of the game.
- 2 stones placed anywhere at the beginning of your turn.
- 3 stones placed anywhere as an action.
- 2 stones placed on 'Think' if you assist a successful action on someone else's turn.
- 1 stone placed on the new meme in the event of a successful meme action.
- 2 bonus stones (of a different color) for every active meme. These stones refresh at the beginning of each chapter.

### **When stones may be spent from where:**

- Nodes:
  - **Probe:** When spreading one of your memes from one character to another.
  - **Create:** When creating a new meme.
  - **Defend:** When hindering someone else's action.
  - **Connect:** When assisting someone else's action.
  - **Think:** At any time, up to the amount spent from one of the other four nodes.
- Memes:
  - **Leaf** memes: On your turn during a **Probe** action, or when **Defending** against another player's action.
  - **Coiled** memes: On your turn during a **Create** action, or when **Connecting** with another player's action.
  - Any meme: When the subject of a **Probe** action on your turn, or if held by the target character when your meme is in danger of being **replaced**.

### **Stones may be moved:**

- If you perform a 'move' action. Every stone may move one space: a branch to or from the connecting node, or the central node to or from the four outlying nodes.
- To a newly-created meme from the adjacent node.

### **Bonuses:**

- If your meme is targeted to be replaced, stones spent from that meme count double: remove an extra stone from the center of the table for every stone spent (both normal and bonus).

### **When you narrate more of the story:**

- Every time you spend stones from a node or from a branch.

# Character Sheet

