

# DEATHWISH

## Espionage Role-playing on the Edge

by Matt Snyder

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*Deathwish is an adaptation of Dust Devils, the Truly Gritty Old West Role-Playing Game. You will need the Dust Devils print edition or PDF edition to use this game expansion. Both versions of Dust Devils are available for purchase at:*

*<http://www.chimera.info/dustdevils/>*

*The game also requires a standard deck of playing cards and a handful of poker chips or other tokens.*

### Preliminary Briefing

This game expansion is a role-playing game of espionage in the tradition of Ian Fleming's famous character James Bond and other spy thrillers popular in movies and novels. Players portray super spies, secret agents and even devious masterminds who play a complicated, high-stakes spy game.

Much like its parent game, DUST DEVILS, this game focuses on a crucial character-centric issue. In DUST DEVILS, that issue is the Devil — will your character “shoot or give up the gun?” That is, will the Devil get the best of him, or will the character overcome his own faults to be a man the Old West can respect and admire?

Deathwish emphasizes a slightly different theme. Here, the issue is “How far will you go for queen and country?” Contrary to the James Bond film title, spies do not “only live twice.” Espionage is dangerous business. This game examines how far an agent is willing to go to risk his own safety for some greater motivation. Deathwish provides a mechanic for that ultimate moment—when the agent must choose between his mission and his own life.

### Character Dossiers

#### Attributes

Deathwish defines characters with four attributes that differ slightly from the four attributes presented in DUST DEVILS. Attribute ratings cannot exceed 5. Players assign 13 points among their agents' four attributes. Those attributes are:

- ♠ Aim—Aim measures a character's hand-eye coordination. In fact, it represents most any physical task an agent might attempt. If a task requires any amount of physical skill—whether piloting a jet or actually aiming a weapon—Aim is the attribute to use. Aim replaces the Hand attribute in DUST DEVILS, and it therefore is associated with the Spades suit.
- ♦ Wits—Wits is the agent's ability to react to his surroundings and notice details and things out of the ordinary, a crucial element of espionage work. It is a

measure of a character's insight and intelligence, as well as his or her cunning. Wits replaces the Eye attribute in DUST DEVILS, and it therefore is associated with the Diamonds suit.

- ♣ Guts—Guts represents both a character's health and fortitude as well as his courage and boldness. Agents might employ Guts to sneak into an embassy in broad daylight or to steer a speedboat off a waterfall! If a situation requires a lot of nerve, Guts is the attribute to use. Just as in DUST DEVILS, the Guts attribute is associated with the Clubs suit.
- ♥ Cool—Simply put, Cool is an agent's style. Cool determines how suavely the character gambles in a Monaco casino, or even how level-headed and in-control he remains when the bullets are flying. Cool replaces the Heart attribute in DUST DEVILS, and it is therefore associated with the Hearts suit.

These attributes are mechanically identical to DUST DEVILS attributes. In each conflict, a player selects two relevant attributes for the situation, and the player then receives a number of cards equal to the sum of the current rating of those attributes. Note that Difficulty may reduce attribute ratings, and therefore reduce the number of cards a player receives in the Deal.

### Agent Specialties

Agent Specialties replace Dust Devil's Knacks. Specialties are skills and proficiencies an agent might employ in the field. These might include: Firearms, Seduction, Piloting, Martial Arts, Stealth, Diplomacy, and so on. Players are encouraged to define their own specialties for their agents, with approval from the Director. The specialties should be neither too broad, nor too narrow in applicability. For example, the Firearms specialty is more appropriate than, say, Sub-machinegun specialty. Conversely, a Piloting specialty that covers driving any and all vehicles from cars to submarines to space shuttles is probably too broad. Instead, Pilot: Aircraft might be more appropriate.

Mechanically speaking, specialties work exactly like Knacks. The player may discard and draw back a number of cards from his hand equal to his character's specialty rating. Players may employ only one specialty in a single conflict.

Players distribute 11 points among a number of Specialty equal to Wits + Cool or 6, whichever is higher. (Note that this differs slightly from DUST DEVILS, which allows players to distribute 11 points among a number of knacks equal to Hand + Eye or 6, whichever is higher)

## Sample gadgets

Gadgetry is a hallmark of the spy genre, made most famous by that seminal James Bond ally, Q. Here are some sample gadgets Deathwish character might employ:

- **Watch** (Laser, garrote wire, phone, detector, Geiger counter / other sensor)
- **Pen** (Knife, 1-shot gun, grenade, camera)
- **Car** (Oil slicks, smoke screen, remote controls, concealed weapons, converts to other vehicle)
- **Sunglasses** (Night-vision, x-ray, infrared, range finder)
- **Hidden camera** (Belt-buckle, ring, shirt button)
- **Disguise kit**
- **PDA** (security-busting EMP and/or explosive, car remote)

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## Gadgets

Deathwish agents do not have Traits as DUST DEVILS characters do. Instead, they possess Gadgets. Each agent character possesses one or two Gadgets. Players may choose any gadget they like, and they should record these on their character sheet at the beginning of each session.

When choosing gadgets for your character, keep in mind that it is best to select something useful in many conflicts, rather than a narrowly defined gadget with little applicability outside a specific situation. For example, it is entirely appropriate to select “Spy car” for a gadget, then define its function during play. The player could leave the actual functions of the car until he has need of them—say, hidden machine gun ports in a chase scene. Later, he might also need to escape, and the car could also become a submarine.

However, once a gadget’s function is defined, it cannot change. Single gadgets like the spy car should be limited to two special functions. Alternatively, the agent may possess two gadgets, each with a single function that does not change once defined. Again, these functions may be defined at the moment they’re needed, but cannot change to a different function after the fact. For example, a “laser watch” cannot become a “garrote wire watch” later in the game, but the laser might still be useful in other conflicts.

An agent’s gadgets may change from session to session, at the player’s discretion. Players may decide their agent has a signature gadget, like a versatile watch. Or, they may opt to have a new “fire-and-forget” gadget or two every session.

Gadgets work very simply—players receive two extra cards

(and only two cards) in the Deal in any conflict their gadget conceivably comes into play. Players are encouraged to involve gadgets in conflicts creatively, and the Director should try to allow their usage in deals often. Finally, keep in mind that the narrator for the scene should incorporate use of the gadget in his narration when they are used.

## Deathwish

The central agent characteristic is the Deathwish. Much like the Devil mechanic in DUST DEVILS, a character’s Deathwish defines an agent’s willingness to put his life at risk. It might represent the extreme dedication he devotes to his missions. Or, Deathwish could indicate how much he’s been wronged by the world and the enemies of his state. Or, it might represent how he feels betrayed by the agency he once worked for.

In all cases, Deathwish works identically the Devil mechanic in DUST DEVILS. In conflict situations that are significantly relevant to a character’s Deathwish, the character may receive extra cards in the deal equal to the current Deathwish rating. Or, the player may receive fewer cards in the deal equal to the Deathwish rating, depending on the situation. Players should set their agents’ Deathwish rating from 1 to 3 at the start of each session. This rating determines the number of more or fewer cards a player receives in the deal when the Deathwish is involved in the conflict.

For more rules information, see “Devil” and “The Road to Hell” in the DUST DEVILS book.

For some possible Deathwish ideas for your agents, please see the sidebar on Page 3.

## In the field

The Deathwish rules are very much the same as DUST DEVILS. This includes the Deal, Five Card Stud rules, the Draw, Call, Folding, high-card narration (See “Fastest Tongue in the West” in DUST DEVILS), and Chips and Stakes mechanics. Please refer to the DUST DEVILS rulebook for details.

## Difficulty

Deathwish does recommend one significant change in Difficulty rules as presented in DUST DEVILS. As an optional rule more suitable for over-the-top spy thriller action (as opposed to gritty spy “realism,” in which case it is recommended that you use the original Difficulty rules), you may wish to tone down the permanence of Difficulty.

Here’s how it works: When agents are involved in a conflict, Difficulty is resolved as normal. The Difficulty reduces character attributes as the narrator describes the conflict. However, once the conflict is resolved, all attributes that were affected *but not at 0*, are restored to their original ratings for the next conflict or scene. The only exception to this restoration of attributes is when a conflict continues immediately after resolution. For example, “after” a firefight, players may decide to deal another hand immediately to continue the firefight. In this case, the attributes do not

recover until the conflict at large is resolved.

However, Difficulty damage is permanent (meaning that it lasts for the remainder of session and/or mission) when the Difficulty is delivered by a character whose Deathwish was activated for the conflict.

FOR EXAMPLE, let's say Agent Summers has just lost a conflict involving his Soviet rival, Ms. Gradenko. Ms. Gradenko has a vendetta against Summers (her Deathwish, in fact). Therefore, the Difficulty inflicted upon Summers is permanent for the session and/or mission, even though none of his attribute ratings are at 0. Note that Agent Summers may recover some attribute ratings; see "Recovery" in DUST DEVILS.

## The Director

In Deathwish, the Director (called the Dealer in DUST DEVILS) is responsible for guiding players through the narrative story constructed during the game. Her job is not so much to present missions with specific aims and goals, but rather to present characters and situations riddled with conflicts and let the players' decisions shape the course of the mission. The Director, then, should react to the actions and decisions of the agents.

As Director, the crucial job is to keep play focused on issues and conflicts related to the agents' various Deathwishes. This game is far less about disarming the super-weapon, and much more about what it takes for a spy to put his life on the line. Therefore, as Director, you should not be concerned about the intricate details of a super-secret crime organization or the details of Soviet equipment and the KGB. Be concerned about providing situations that let the players really push the limits of their agents via the Deathwish mechanic.

For more information on running the game, see "Raw Dealer" in the DUST DEVILS rule book.

## Try to Take Over the World!

Traditionally, role-playing games encourage players to act as a team to overcome some challenge or conflict. That paradigm can work superbly in Deathwish, and you might consider the "Mission: Impossible" team as a model for such a group.

However, Deathwish can also work well even when players are pitted against one another. In this case, separate players might play both CIA and KGB operatives. Or, one or more players might opt to create an "Evil Mastermind" and his colorful hench-

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### Possible Agent Deathwishes

#### Loner

The agent's family was killed (by government body, terrorist cell, etc.) and the agent has nothing—or no one—to live for. He might receive extra cards based on his Deathwish rating in conflicts where he acts alone, or fewer in conflicts where he must rely on someone else.

#### For Queen & Country

The agent is so loyal to his agency (whether on her majesty's secret service, or the Motherland, or Uncle Sam) that he puts his life on his line to do his duty. He might receive Deathwish benefits when putting his life above his duty, but receive fewer cards when he's cautious or diverted from his loyal goals.

#### Daredevil

The agent is an adrenaline junky willing to do anything it takes to do his work—and usually as over-the-top as he can. He might receive extra cards when pushing the limits of action, but receive fewer when the mission—or at least one conflict—goes without incident (much to the approval of the agent's superiors, no doubt!).

#### Vendetta

The agent seeks revenge on something or someone. When the agent pursues that goal, he might receive more cards from his Deathwish rating, but when he's involved in conflicts unrelated to his ceaseless vengeance, he might receive fewer cards.

#### Marked for Death

The agent is a walking dead man, with a price on his head. He is a running man, and he may receive extra cards from his Deathwish while trying to evade his pursuers. Conversely, should the agent "stand and fight" or otherwise risk getting caught or assassinated, he might lose cards.

#### Top Secret

The agent is an operative of so secret an agency or mission that should he place secrecy above his own safety. Conflicts in which he must conceal his true identity or mission might earn more cards, but should he be forced to divulge the identity or mission, even in a small way, the Director may allot fewer cards in the Deal.



men, while other players take on the roles of secret agents out to foil their plans.

Should your group take this approach, the only caveat is for everyone to understand that the game is not a competition. Rather, it is more akin to everyone taking part in making an engrossing movie. The members of your group should be sophisticated enough to know that everyone's working together to craft a great spy-thriller, not working against one another to "kill the other guy." It's not about winning and losing, in this case. It's about enjoying the whole narrative and exploring the Deathwish theme as a group.

## The Briefcase

Here is a suggestion for a very simple situation that you might introduce to start Deathwish play. This situation presents a simple conundrum for operatives, and it could easily be adopted for a group working together or for a group with agents from divergent agencies or organizations.

The mission is simple: The agents must retrieve a certain briefcase (even if they're on "opposing" sides). Of course, it won't be that easy. Other agencies will be after the package, and rogue agents or elements might acquire it to try to sell to the highest bidder.

With only this simple conflict, and perhaps a specific locale like Paris or Hong Kong, the Director and players should have more than enough to launch right into play.

The interesting element, particularly from the Director's perspective, is that this situation does not specify what's in the briefcase from the onset. The director may have an idea, but he should be willing to adapt that idea based on game-play, as players come up with suggestions and narrations that hint as to its contents. As Director, you might even explain to the players that the contents of the briefcase are unknown, and they can help define what those contents are, especially by narrating events after conflicts.

Possible briefcase contents might include: super-weapon components; spy-plane blueprints; chemical or biological weapons; illegal African conflict diamonds; nuclear launch codes; or even nothing—a red herring! Possible briefcase "owners" (at the beginning of the mission) include: Soviet defectors; double-agents; terrorists; unknown secret agents from the players' own agency; an unlucky—but innocent and, of course, beautiful—woman; henchmen of a criminal mastermind; or even perhaps the agents themselves, who are unable to open the case before enemies intervene. (It might even be cuffed to one agent's arm!)

## Mission Debriefing

These are your orders. You mission, should you choose to accept it, is to have a lot of fun. Fortunately, this message will not self destruct. In fact, if you have questions, send email to: [matt@chimera.info](mailto:matt@chimera.info)

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### NEED-TO-KNOW INTEL

There are a number of movies and novels that inspired Deathwish. These include:

#### License to Kill

Any and all James Bond films, especially:

- Dr. No
- Goldfinger
- From Russia With Love—the author's favorite Bond film
- The Spy Who Loved Me
- Goldeneye

#### Spymaster Thrillers

- The Hunt for Red October
- Mission: Impossible
- The Sum of All Fears
- Ronin
- Swordfish

### Humor in Action

- Sneakers—An underrated classic; it's cast of characters are ideal role-models for a player character group
- In Like Flint
- Austin Powers, International Man of Mystery—hilarious James Bond parody.

### Spook romance

- Spy Game
- The Russia House

### Novels

- *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, by John le Carré
- *Cardinal of the Kremlin*, by Tom Clancy
- *The Hunt for Red October*, by Tom Clancy
- *Patriot Games*, by Tom Clancy