

Poisoned
a pirate rpg



*by D. Vincent Baker
& for adults, please*

*I*n this, the Year of Our Lord 1701, did end the bloody career of the pirate Captain Jonathan Abraham Pallor, called Brimstone Jack.

He did not die on the gallows, nor by the sword, nor shot in two by cannon. He died of poison, administered to him by his cook, an assassin under the King's orders.

This is what happened next.

Poison'd

Drag forward the cook, the assassin Tom Reed, throw him to the deck. He's spitting and proclaiming us dead men all, no captain no more, ship listing and hungry, and His Majesty's Ship *The Resolute* even now hauls up its anchor over in Kingston Bay.

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Creating Characters

Every PC's a pirate.

Choose your character's position under Brimstone Jack:

- Boatswain ("bosun" – sails, rigging, anchor, cables; also the day to day work of the crew)
- Boy (light labor, service & training)
- Carpenter (the soundness of the ship's masts, yards, boats & hull, patching holes under fire)
- Gunnery Master (the ship's cannons, powder & balls; the gunnery crew)
- Quartermaster (the ship's purse, books & accounts, and the provisioning & quartering of the company)
- Sailing Master (navigation and steering the ship)
- Sailor (manual labor, gunnery, fighting)
- Surgeon (medical care of all on board)
- X's Mate (eg Boatswain's Mate, Captain's Mate, Carpenter's Mate, Cook's Mate)

Which of the following sins has your character committed?

Choose none, one, any or all:

- Adultery
- Blasphemy
- Idolatry
- Murder
- Mutiny
- Rape
- Robbery
- Sodomy

You may count a sin twice, if your character's commission of it has been prolonged, repeated, excessive, and unremorseful, and continues to be so even now.

Count it blasphemy if your character is a woman living, acting, and dressing the man. Count it twice blasphemy only if she has also somehow contrived to fuck women as a man.

Devil is equal to the number of sins you've chosen. However, if you've chosen more sins than six, Devil is still 6, and if you've chosen fewer than two, it's still 2.

Soul is equal to 8 minus Devil.

Which of the following has your character suffered? Choose any or all, but at least one:

- Accursing
- Arrest
- Attempted murder
- Beating
- Branding
- Damnation
- Disownment
- Impressment
- Imprisonment
- Lashing
- Mutilation
- Rape
- Torture

Mark an x next to any your character suffered at the hands of Captain Brimstone Jack.

Brutality is equal to the number you've chosen. However, if you've chosen more than six, Brutality is still 6; if you've chosen only one, it's still 2.

From which of the following ambitions does your character take strength? Choose any or all, but at least one:

To be captain

To own land

To be pardoned

To be revenged upon (here name another player's pirate)

To be revenged upon (here name a man beyond your station)

To fuck (here name another player's pirate)

To fuck (here name the daughter or son of a man beyond your station)

To spit in the eye of God

To spit in the eye of the devil

To live forever

To be remembered forever

To be regarded highly by society

Ambition is equal to the number you've chosen. However, if you've chosen more than six, Ambition is still 6; if you've chosen only one, it's still 2.

Choosing which Stats

If you want your pirate to treat personal danger casually and without fear, choose a higher Devil than Ambition.

If you want your pirate to prefer cunning, stealth, and deceit, choose a higher Ambition than Brutality.

If you want your pirate to be ruthless, conscienceless and violent, choose a higher Brutality than Soul.

If you want your pirate to endure punishment and torture without breaking, or to be calm and skilled in chaos, choose a higher Soul than Devil.

The greater the difference, the better your pirate will be at that thing – but of course the worse your pirate will be at the thing that follows.

All four are desirable! Your pirate won't escape the need for any of them. Your pirate will go into danger, will need to be cunning, will need to be merciless, will suffer in body and spirit. Choose the one or the ones you desire most, as best you can.

Also, I say "choose," but sometimes you'll find that your pirate's life up to now has its undeniable logic, quite as though your pirate is choosing for himself.

Soul & Bargains

When your pirate strikes a bargain with another character, you put your Soul in hock to the other character's player. One time, until such time as your pirate has fulfilled the bargain, that other player may withhold from your side of any roll dice equal to your Soul. This act also fulfills: your pirate, thus punished, has no further obligation to the bargain.

Once a bargain's struck, treat each of its specifications as its own obligation, held and fulfilled independent of any others.

You cannot forgive an unfulfilled obligation. The generosity allowed you is to decline to withhold dice as is your right. Each opportunity declined is an act of forgiveness, but never the final one. You can never give someone's Soul back and their obligation unmet.

Brinksmanship

Brinksmanship is equal to the greatest of Soul, Devil, Brutality or Ambition.

Brinksmanship means your pirate's willingness to commit ever more, to win. It means escalating both risk and violence. You'll roll it when your character fights or leads others in a fight, be it fist to fist, sword to sword, pistol to pistol, or broadside to broadside: your Brinksmanship vs your enemy's.

Profile

Now, every pirate owns some combination of a long wicked knife, a sword, and a pistol. Additional to those, which of the following weapons does your character keep to hand? Choose at most two, and you needn't choose any:

A second sword, for the off hand, as the Florentines do

A brace of pistols

Some distinctive hand weapon, like a hatchet, a cudgel, a slaver's whip, or a blacksmith's hammer

A sharpshooter's long musket

Grenades

Not a weapon, but your pirate's a great hulking brute with fists like big stones

Not a weapon, but your pirate's tattoos and savage demeanor are frightening in themselves

Not a weapon, but your pirate is, while slight, nevertheless quick, wiry-strong, and vicious

Also, if your pirate's suffered mutilation, name a disability your character suffers accordingly: a lost limb, a lost eye, a split tongue, terrible scars.

While your pirate's fully armed, Profile is equal to 2 plus the number of additional weapons you chose (0 to 2), minus the number of disabilities you chose (0 or 1).

For all pirates, soldiers and sailors, disarmed means Profile 1.

When your pirate fights, you'll compare Profile vs Profile to award one side or the other the advantage.

Outstanding Bargains

Once everyone's pirates are finished otherwise, go around the circle and introduce them. Then go around the circle again. When it's your turn, name one of the other pirates and choose one:

(Said pirate) swore to back me for ship's captain

(Said pirate) swore to help me (name an ambition)

(Said pirate) owes me 3 Leisure

(Said pirate) swore to protect me from (name a violence)

(Said pirate) owes me his life

(Said pirate) swore to fight by my side when all others desert me.

Say it out loud and write it on your sheet.

Creating a Ship

Captain Brimstone Jack named his ship *The Dagger*. Your new captain might choose to rechristen it, when you have one.

The Dagger is a two-masted Bermuda sloop, with (by default) 16 guns, all 4- and 6-pounders, and a company of 80.

Which of the following are most true of *The Dagger*? Choose two, as a group:

It's fast

It's frightening to see

It has a grim reputation

It's heavily gunned (20 guns, including four 8-pounders)

It's lucky

It's nimble

It's solidly-built

Your ship's Profile equals 8 plus the number you chose – that is, since you chose two, your ship's Profile is 10.

In addition, choose one of the following to be *The Dagger*'s best strength:

Pursuit & escape

Cannon to cannon

Broadside to broadside

Boarding & repelling boarders

When you're fighting that fight, treat Profile as 1 better than it is.

Creating a company

Which of the following are true of your ship's company? Choose two, as a group:

It's large (110 souls)

Its members are, by and large, unreprobate murderers

Its members have served together for many years

It's well-armed and eager to fight

Its members have trained to fight side by side

And choose one:

It's a skeleton crew, barely sufficient to the ship (50 souls)

It doesn't have a strong common language, instead relying on pidgin and guessing

It's been badly mistreated by Brimstone Jack

It's full of petty rivalry and backstabbing

Its members are, by and large, drunkards and malingerers

Its members will not fight unless threatened and hard driven

Your company's Profile equals 5 plus the number you chose from the first list, minus the number you chose from the second – that is, since you chose two from the first list and one from the second, your company's Profile is 6.

Example characters

Young Zeb Harris, carpenter's mate

Sins: murder, mutiny

Devil: 2

Soul: 5

Suffered: beating, branding, lashing

Brutality: 3

Ambitions: to be revenged upon —, to fuck —'s daughter

Ambition: 2

Brinksmanship: 5

I go armed with cutlass, pistol and a carpenter's mallet

Profile: 3

Hugh McMinn swore to protect me from rape.

Pigfuck Dan, gunnery master

Sins: blasphemy, murder, rape, robbery, sodomy

Devil: 5

Soul: 2

Suffered: cursing, arrest, attempted murder, damnation, impressment, rape

Brutality: 6

Ambitions: to spit in the eye of God

Ambition: 1

Brinksmanship: 6

I go armed with knives, cutlass, a brace of pistols, and grenades

Profile: 4

Young Zeb Harris swore to back me for ship's captain.

Hugh McMinn, sailor

Sins: Blasphemy, murder x 2, robbery

Devil: 4

Soul: 3

Suffered: attempted murder, beating, impressment, lashing

Brutality: 4

Ambitions: to be captain, to own land, to be pardoned, to be revenged upon —, to be revenged also upon —, to be highly regarded by society

Ambition: 6

Brinksmanship: 6

I go armed with cutlass and pistol, and I'm a hulking brute with fists like stones.

Profile: 3

Young Zeb Harris swore to back me for captain.

The GM's Characters

Pirates & Others

All the information you need for an NPC is a name, a Brinksmanship, and a Profile. For an NPC pirate, give him also his position onboardship.

For Brinksmanship, roll two dice and choose the higher.

For Profile, choose up to three:

- The NPC's huge
- The NPC's vicious
- The NPC's heavily armed
- The NPC's a merciless killer
- The NPC fights dirty and has no scruples at all
- The NPC's trained, disciplined and professional
- The NPC does not fear death
- The NPC's artful with sword and pistol
- The NPC's cursed with a berserk rage
- The NPC's unflinching and tenacious
- The NPC has everything to lose
- The NPC has nothing to lose

The NPC's Profile begins at 2; add 1 for each you've chosen.

If the NPC's grown old, soft, or unwell, subtract 1 from his Profile. Name a disability too, if you want, and subtract 1 from the NPC's Profile.

A usual NPC will have a Profile of 3 or 4, at most; reserve Profile 5 for exceptional NPCs.

Use this selfsame procedure to create individual NPC pirates, captains, officers, constables, governors, bodyguards, soldiers, &c. For private persons, use this procedure, except: for Brinksmanship, choose whichever of the two dice seems better; and for Profile, calculate their Profile by 1 plus modifiers instead of by 2 plus modifiers.

For all pirates, soldiers and sailors, disarmed means Profile 1. For all civilians, disarmed means Profile 0.

Companies, Crews & Mobs

Use this for an enemy ship's company, a company of marines, a constable's crew, a mob of outraged citizens, &c.

Which of the following are true of the mob? Choose at most three:

- It's large
- Its members are, by and large, unreprobate murderers
- Its members have served together for many years
- It's well-armed and eager to fight
- Its members have trained to fight side by side
- It's protecting its members' families and homes
- Its members share a strong faith or fierce loyalty to their cause
- Its members are very well-paid to follow orders
- Its leaders have its members over a barrel

And choose at most three:

- It's small, barely sufficient to its purpose
- It's a merchant crew, scared and unprepared to fight
- If it's offered mercy, it will gladly lay down arms
- It's been badly mistreated by its leaders
- It's full of petty rivalry and backstabbing
- Its members are, by and large, drunkards and malingerers
- Its members will not fight unless threatened and hard driven
- Its leaders are weak and do not well control it
- It's hungry, broken, or poorly equipped

The mob's Profile equals 5 plus the number you chose from the first list, minus the number you chose from the second.

A usual mob will have a Profile of 6, 7 at most; reserve Profile 8 for exceptional mobs.

Sloops & Ships

Name the vessel.

Which of these are true of it? Choose at most three:

- It's fast
- It has a grim reputation
- It's heavily gunned
- It's imposing
- It's lucky
- It's nimble
- It's solidly-built

And which of these are true of it? Choose at most two:

- It's burdened
- It's fragile
- It leaks
- It's lightly gunned
- It's old
- It's poorly crewed
- It's slow

If you're making a merchant ship, not a warship, choose at most one from the first list, and at most three from the second.

If the vessel is a sloop (or a brig, a brigantine, a snow, &c – a vessel of one or two masts), its Profile equals 8 plus the number you chose from the first list, minus the number you chose from the second. An armed sloop has 10-20 guns and a company of around 80. A merchant sloop might have 4-8 guns and a crew less than 20.

If the vessel is properly a ship, of three masts, its Profile equals 10 plus your choices from the first list minus your choices from the second. A warship has 20-40 guns and a company around 200; a merchantman has 10 guns and a crew less than 50.

If the ship is a ship of the line of the navy, its Profile equals 12 plus your choices from the first list minus your choices from the second. It has 40-60 guns, including some 24-pounders, and a crew of 250 or more.

A usual warship, whichever its size, will have a Profile no more than 2 over its default (no more than 10 for a sloop, 12 for a ship, 14 for a ship of the line); reserve Profiles 3 over (11 for a sloop, 13 for a ship, 15 for a ship of the line) for exceptional vessels.

Fortresses

Name the fortress.

Which of these are true of the fortress? Choose at most three:

- It's securely positioned
- It has a grim reputation
- It's heavily gunned
- It's imposing
- It's solidly-built

And which of these are true of the fortress? Choose at most two:

- It's only wood and brick, not stone
- It's approachable from any side
- It's lightly gunned
- It's old
- It's undermanned

The fortress' Profile equals 12 plus the number you chose from the first list, minus the number you chose from the second.

A usual fortress will have a Profile of 14 or 15, at most; reserve Profile 16 for exceptional fortresses.

Dice & Consequences

Success Rolls

Make a success roll when you need to know whether your pirate can do a thing, how well, and to what advantage.

A string of success rolls will lead to a fight, no way around that – it's the pirate's lot, and it's usually sooner than later. So as you go, you collect Xs, markers showing your victories, which when the fight arrives you can spend to improve your odds.

If you're a canny player, when you see a fight on the horizon, you'll look for success rolls to try first, to better your position.

Dice

Roll Soul vs Devil when your pirate acts despite pain or duress, or presses on in the face of exhaustion, or endures torture or deprivation; also when your pirate practices some skill in bad conditions. You roll your Soul; the GM rolls your Devil.

Roll Devil vs Ambition when your pirate goes into danger or does something personally risky, but not fighting. You roll your Devil; the GM rolls your Ambition.

Roll Ambition vs Brutality when your pirate must keep still, or must act with stealth, deceit, cunning, or great care. You roll your Ambition; the GM rolls your Brutality.

Roll Brutality vs Soul when your pirate attacks a helpless, unsuspecting, or entirely outmatched victim. You roll your Brutality; the GM rolls your Soul.

Let's use Brutality vs Soul for example: your pirate's standing over the assassin Tom Reed, pistol to his forehead. "I pull the trigger," you say.

You take up dice equal to your Brutality and roll them all. I, your GM, take up dice equal to your Soul and roll them all.

A 4, a 5 or a 6 on a die counts for effect. Count up all your 4s, 5s and 6s, and I do the same. If you have more, your pirate's action comes off to your advantage, and how many more matters. If I have the same or more, though, either your pirate's action fails, or it succeeds but at no advantage to you.

For example, suppose that you roll 1 4 5 5 and I roll 3 3 6. Your roll counts for 3 – the 4, the 5, the 5 – and my roll counts for 1 – the 6. You take 2 advantage, 2 being the difference between your 3 and my 1.

Suppose instead that you roll 1 2 2 5 and I roll 2 5 6. Your roll counts for 1 – the 5 – and my roll counts for 2 – the 5, the 6. You take no advantage.

Consequences

So: for each 1 advantage you take, mark one X.

The Xs you've marked are good only for fights.

If you take no advantage, so be it; you don't lose any of the Xs you've accumulated so far. However, if there's conceivably a fight at hand, the GM can bring it to you now, by your pirate's failure or by his disadvantageous success, and with no chance for more success rolls first.

Flashbacks

If you're a canny player, recall, you'll see a fight coming and you'll look for success rolls to make, to build up some Xs. You can look about your pirate now, but you can also look into the past. You can propose a flashback yourself or you can ask the GM to set one for you, sight unseen. There are no fights allowed in flashback. Return to the present before the fight or else the GM can simply say who won.

Fights

It will always come to a fight.

Profiles

Compare the Profiles of both sides.

For fights between players' pirates, whichever side has the higher Profile, that player gets additional Xs for the fight, a number equal to the difference.

For fights between a player's side and NPCs:

If the player's side has a higher Profile than the GM's, the GM gets 1 X for the fight.

If the player's side and the GM's Profiles match, then the GM gets 2 Xs for the fight.

If the GM's side has a higher Profile than the players, the GM gets 2 Xs, plus Xs equal to the difference, for the fight.

The player gets whatever Xs are on her sheet.

If one side's Profile beats the other's by 4 or more, it's not a fight, it's suicide. The side with the overwhelmingly higher Profile can choose to take the side with the lower Profile into their power, without rolling dice at all.

Dice

You take up dice equal to your character's Brinkmanship. Your opponent – the player of your character's enemy, be it another player or me the GM - takes up dice equal to her character's Brinkmanship. Roll them all. Compare them exactly as for internal conflicts: 4s, 5s and 6s count, how many do each of us have? (If we tie, we each reroll our lowest die, and we keep doing it until we don't tie anymore.)

Now whoever has fewer is losing, and has to choose: lose, spend Xs, or escalate.

Escalating means attacking to inflict greater harm - and risking greater harm yourself - in order to keep fighting. Check the boxed info, pages 14-15, for how various fights can escalate. All fights begin at the first, and can escalate no farther than the third.

When you escalate a fight, pick up any of your dice you'd like to reroll, roll them, and return them to the dice you let lie.

With good luck, now you're winning, and your enemy must choose whether to lose or escalate. With bad luck, you're losing still, and must choose whether to lose after all or to escalate again. Oh and now on a tie: if you *advance to* a tie, that's a win; if you *stay at* a tie, that's a lose – a cryptic distinction here on paper but when you see it in play it'll make perfect sense.

Once the fight has escalated twice, you no longer have the choice to escalate. If you lose now, you lose all.

Consequences

Losing means suffering the full possible harm of the fight, at its current, final, level of escalation.

Winning means suffering only the necessary harm of having engaged in the fight, and also means taking an advantage forward: for each 4, 5 or 6 on your dice in excess of your opponents', mark an X on your sheet.

Winning on a tie (which will happen occasionally) means marking no Xs.

Fighting on a side

Mobs and ships' crews, it'll sometimes happen that the players' pirates fight under the captain's orders. Then the captain's victory depends on the effort and will of all.

Captain's player, take dice for Brinksmanship into your hand. From those, give one die to each of the players whose character fights under yours. Players, take a second die and add it to the one your hand (take it from the bank, from nowhere in particular).

Now, when your captain's player rolls Brinksmanship, it's up to you to roll the two dice in your hand. If you choose to do so, that means that your pirate has done his part and stood strong; the captain's player gets those dice. If you decline to roll them, instead holding them back when the captain's player lets hers roll, your pirate's disobeyed the captain and doesn't fight. The captain's player doesn't get the dice, but instead you mark two Xs on your sheet.

Spending Xs

Before the fight:

You can spend three Xs to kill an NPC with no fight, any NPC within your reach. Erase three Xs and say how your character does the bastard. This works only on individual NPCs – you can't kill a mob or a ship this way.

During the fight:

Strictly, the loser gets the first option to spend Xs, then the winner, then the loser, and alternating &c. You'll only rarely have to resort to this formality, though; generally, whomever would like to spend Xs, may, just then. You may spend as many Xs at a time as you like.

Whether you're losing or winning, you can spend 1 or more Xs to roll that many additional dice into your side.

Whether you're losing or winning, if you're fighting ship to ship or company to company, you can spend Xs to inflict harm on a named member of the opposite crew. Spend 1 X to put that pirate (and his player's dice!) out of the rest of the fight, but not lastingly harmed. Spend 2 Xs to give that pirate a disfiguring or disabling but not deadly wound. Spend 3 Xs to give that pirate a deadly wound.

If you're winning at the first or second level of escalation, you can spend Xs to inflict harm upon your opponent, according to the current level of escalation, even if your opponent goes on to win the fight. Spend 1 X if it's the first level of escalation, 2 Xs if it's the second. Your opponent can spend matching Xs to undo this. Don't do it in a fight pistol to pistol, or pursuit to evasion, it won't make any sense.

At the end of the fight:

If you've lost, you can spend 2 Xs to reduce the harm you suffer, by one level of escalation's worth. You can reduce the harm you suffer this way only once; you can't spend 4 Xs to reduce it by two levels' worth, for instance.

If you've won, you can spend 2 Xs to reduce the harm you inflict upon the loser, by one level of escalation's worth. You can reduce the harm you inflict this way only once, and furthermore, if the loser has already reduced it, you cannot do so again.

After the fight:

In any event, after the fight, lose any Xs you have that you haven't spent. You can't save Xs through one fight for another. Only the winner carries any Xs forward, and only those awarded for the win.

An example of Dice & Consequences

"Yeah, well, while you two are arguing about it," says Hannah, "I kick Tom Reed to the deck and beat his head in with a pin. He's helpless, right?"

"He is," I say.

She's playing Hugh McMinn – go look him up to follow along. She takes up 4 dice for Brutality, I take up 3 for Soul, and we both roll. She rolls 2 2 4 5, for 2; I roll 2 5 6, for 2 as well. Consequently Hugh takes no advantage, Hannah marks no Xs, and if I feel like it I can bring the fight now.

I do feel like it. “You go to knock him down, but he has a boning knife in his sleeve. He dodges you and then tries to stick the knife between your ribs.”

“Fucker,” Hannah says.

I quick make Tom Reed as an NPC pirate. I roll him Brinksmanship 4, I give him Profile 4 (for being a merciless killer, for having nothing to lose, and for not being unarmed after all).

Hugh's Profile's 3, so Tom Reed's beats it by one and I get 3 Xs for the fight. Hannah has no Xs, having just started play and blown her only success roll.

Hannah rolls Brinksmanship 6: 1 2 2 4 5 6, for 3. I roll Brinksmanship 4: 4 4 5 6, for 4. Hannah snarls at me.

Her choice: escalate or lose, suffering only a scarring wound. (Normally she could also choose to spend Xs, but she has none.)

“Oh I escalate,” Hannah says. She picks up her 1 2 2 and rerolls: 2 3 5, for a tie. When you escalate, advancing to a tie is a win. “Fucker comes in with his knife, I smash him over the crown with my pin.”

Now I'm losing, but I have 3 Xs to spend. “I spend Xs for dice,” I say. I roll a die for a 4. “Cool. I'm winning now, right?”

Hannah narrows her eyes.

“I spend my 2 Xs—” I point at the page in the book so she knows I'm not making it up “— to inflict harm on you. ‘A disfiguring or disabling wound.’ Let's say he slashes up with his knife like this, and he opens your cheek and cuts your eye.”

“I can only prevent that if I have Xs to spend?”

“Yep.”

“Suck ass,” she says. “I kill the fucker. I'm losing now, right? I escalate.”

She picks up her remaining 2 2 and rerolls it for a 1 6.

She's back up to a tie, so that counts as a win. She marks no Xs to take forward, though, because she won by no dice.

“That would've sucked if you'd rolled low,” I say. “He'd'a won then.”

“Shut up,” she says. “I give him a deadly wound, right? I break his skull. And check this out, fucker. He's on the deck. His skull's cracked, he's got blood pouring down his face, blood pouring down mine? I smash his head fucking open. He's helpless so Brutality vs Soul, right now.”

“Your Brutality's gone up,” I say. “You've suffered mutilation now.” (See the next section, about changing your pirate, for this rule.)

She marks it on her sheet.

She rolls 5 dice for Brutality, I roll 3 for Soul. She rolls 1 2 3 3 3, for none; I roll 2 3 6, for 1.

“You're kidding me,” she says.

“You can't bring yourself.” I say. “After he's down and done, you can't follow through. You're like —”

“I spit on him,” she says. “Fucker isn't worth it. Pigfuck, you want to be captain? No wait, I'm shouting that: Pigfuck Dan, you want to be fucking captain? Blood's all down my face, my eye's half out, blood all over my belaying pin – Pigfuck, you want to be captain? Come fucking take it from me.”

Escalating Fights

Fist to fist

All fist fights mean battering and bruising, to both.

1. Your pride, vs humbling your enemy; to
2. Being stunned, knocked down, or pinned, vs doing the same to your enemy; to
3. Broken bones, a smashed face, or a broken head, vs doing the same to your enemy.

Escalating can mean losing your temper, getting serious, fighting dirtier, fighting more recklessly, pinning your opponent down, changing the arena of the fight, or improvising a weapon.

Knife to knife

All knife fights mean minor cuts, bruises, and near things, to both.

1. A scarring but not deadly wound, vs giving one to your enemy; to
2. A disfiguring or disabling wound, vs giving one to your enemy; to
3. A deadly wound, vs giving one to your enemy.

Escalating can mean losing your temper, scenting blood, fighting dirtier, fighting more carefully, bringing in a new weapon, knocking your opponent down, or getting your opponent's back to the wall.

Sword to sword

In a sword fight, if the loser can't easily withdraw, he comes under the power of the winner.

1. Giving first blood to your enemy, vs taking first blood of your enemy; to
2. Taking a deadly wound, vs giving one to your enemy; to
3. Being killed outright, vs killing your enemy outright.

Escalating can mean getting serious, going for the throat, provoking your opponent into losing his temper, disarming your opponent, driving your opponent to a disadvantageous position, or bringing in a new weapon.

Gun to gun

In a gun fight, standing down means submitting yourself to the will of your enemy.

1. Standing down to your enemy's held gun, vs your enemy standing down to yours; to
2. Standing down to your enemy's leveled gun, vs your enemy standing down to yours; to
3. A deadly wound, vs giving one to your enemy.

Escalating means raising, leveling, and firing your gun.

Aside: Unmatched Opponents

Suppose that Pigfuck Dan takes cutlass to hand and attacks Tom Reed, armed only with his fists and teeth. It's easy: Pigfuck Dan faces escalation and consequences according to fist to fist, while Tom Reed faces escalation and consequences according to sword to sword. If the fight escalates all the way, and Tom Reed wins, he's given Pigfuck Dan broken bones, a smashed face or a broken head. If it escalates all the way and Pigfuck Dan wins, he's killed Tom Reed outright.

Remember also that for a pirate, unarmed means Profile 1. This fight doesn't favor poor Tom.

Your ship pursuing another

For your ship escaping another's pursuit, simply reverse these.

1. Your ship keeping pace, vs drawing near enough to engage your enemy's with cannonfire; to
2. Your ship falling behind, vs drawing near enough to exchange broadsides with your enemy's; to
3. Your ship foundering to wear & breakage, vs drawing near enough to board your enemy's.

Escalating can mean driving harder before the wind; cutting sharper against the wind; making for fog, shallows or treacherous waters; settling in for a long hunt; testing your ship's masts and sails; or lightening your ship's load.

Cannon to cannon, at range

1. Your ship driven off course to avoid fire, vs your enemy's; to
2. Your ship battered into wear & breakage, vs your enemy's; to
3. Your ship broken and disabled with many crew killed, vs your enemy's.

Escalating can mean loading heated shot or chain shot, drawing closer to your opponent, holding steady despite coming under increasing fire, robbing your enemy's wind, cutting across your enemy's bow or stern, depleting your reserve of powder and balls, or rallying your gunnery crew to better speed and accuracy.

Broadside to broadside

If a fight broadside to broadside escalates even once, it means the winning ship battered into wear & breakage as well.

If the losing ship survives the fight, it nevertheless can't break away; it's necessarily within the winner's reach for grappling and boarding.

1. Your ship battered into wear & breakage, vs your enemy's; to
2. Your ship broken and disabled with many crew killed, vs your enemy's; to
3. Your ship sunk, vs your enemy's.

Escalating means holding hard and exchanging another broadside, or double- or even triple-loading your cannons.

Company to company, to crew, to mob

In a melee, if the losing side can't easily withdraw, it comes under the power of the winning.

1. Many of your own beaten and bloodied, vs many of your enemy's; to
2. A few of your own killed, vs a few of your enemy's; to
3. Many of your own killed, vs many of your enemy's.

Escalating can mean digging in, bringing reinforcements, employing savvy tactics, seizing sudden opportunities, employing deceit or surprise, stepping up the brutality, or focusing your attacks on your enemy's officers or the civilians under her guard.

Aside: Consorts & Fleets

A consort is a ship's companion ship. If your ship fights with a consort alongside, properly matched to your own ship, add 1 to your Brinksmanship, take 2 free Xs for the battle, and remember to include your consort in your escalations. This only counts for fighting at cannons or broadsides, not for pursuit & escape.

For battles between fleets: give the fleets their Profiles by creatively reading the rules for creating companies. Escalate fleet battles as for melees between companies, but put in ships for souls. Make them battered and disabled for broken and bloodied, and sunk for killed.

Changing Your Pirate

Changing stats

When your pirate goes armed as he's accustomed, Profile is as usual. Unarmed, however, Profile goes to 1.

When your pirate commits a new sin, add it to your pirate's list. Subtract 1 from Soul and add 1 to Devil. If this calls for you to adjust Brinksmanship, do. Character creation's maximum of 6 and minimum of 2 no longer hold. However, do not track Soul into negative numbers; Soul below 0 remains just Soul 0.

If your pirate suffers new violence, add it to the list. Add 1 to Brutality, with no maximum bound. If this calls for you to adjust Brinksmanship, do.

If your pirate gives up hope of fulfilling an ambition, or passes by the opportunity to fulfill it, or accepts another's taking it away, erase it from the list. Subtract 1 from Ambition, with no minimum bound. If this calls for you to adjust Brinksmanship, do. If this was your pirate's last ambition, Ambition goes to 0 and there it will stay.

If your pirate fulfills an ambition, mark it with an X. You may, if you choose, add a new ambition; if you do, add 1 to Ambition, with no maximum bound. If this calls for you to adjust Brinksmanship, do.

If your pirate makes a true and full confession, makes restitution as required, and becomes a faithful servant of God, reduce Devil to 0. Do not adjust Soul. If this calls for you to adjust Brinksmanship, do. If your pirate then backslides, restore Devil to what it was, and in addition he's committed a new sin, the sin of backsliding.

Deadly wounds

If your pirate suffers a deadly wound, strike a bargain or die:
Bargain with a surgeon, either a player's character or an NPC:

treat as a normal bargain.

Bargain with a non-surgeon, either a player's character or an NPC:
treat as a normal bargain, plus add a disfigurement.

Bargain with God: treat as a normal bargain, plus give up an ambition.

Bargain with the devil: treat as a normal bargain, plus commit a new sin.

Bargain with a guardian ghost, if you have one: treat as a normal bargain, plus the guardian ghost subtracts 1 from Devil, as below.

Death

If your pirate dies, suffer judgment or become a ghost. Roll Ambition vs Soul. If you win, you can choose to become a ghost. Otherwise, or if you choose so, on to judgment.

Judgment

If your Devil is 0, you're redeemed in the sight of God and may enter Heaven. Otherwise, roll Soul vs Devil. If you win, you win silent eternal rest. If you lose, you fall into the Pit for eternal torment.

Become a ghost

Choose a player's pirate, or the ship. You must follow him or it; you are bound to him or it until you find peace or until the final trumpet.

Choose whether your pirate's ghost will become a guardian or a curse.

If a guardian:

Before every fight, you get a number of Xs equal to Soul. Spend them to the benefit of your charge.

As a guardian, you may bargain for the life of your pirate or the pirates on board your ship. For each such bargain you strike, subtract 1 from your Devil, to a minimum of 1. Do not adjust your Soul. Any time after your Devil reaches 1, you may choose to go on to final judgment.

If a curse:

The GM passes to you an accursing card. You become a mini-GM, in control of this cruel fortune. Spend its Xs and bring its attendant cruel fortunes into play exactly as you like.

For purposes of others trying to exorcise you, you may consider your potency to be proportional to your Devil: a 3 would equal any priest or wise woman; a 6 would match the authority of the Pope or the talent of the most ancient witch.

Leaving Play & Ending the Game

If your pirate, having died, comes to final judgment, he leaves play.

If your pirate retires, willingly or unwillingly, but finally, from his life of piracy, he leaves play.

If your pirate fulfills or abandons sufficient of his ambitions that you're left at a loss for direction, he leaves play.

If your pirate renounces all ties to the other players' pirates, ship, and company, he leaves play.

If your pirate becomes so foul and ruthless a sinner that you no longer want to play him, he leaves play.

The first time any player's pirate leaves play, that player chooses:

- to make a new pirate and continue to play;
- to become the GM's mate, as it were, taking over for herself some Cruel Fortunes and NPCs; or
- to end the game: this is the game's final session.

The second time any player's pirate leaves play, this is the game's final session, no choice to make.



Cruel Fortune

When a cruel fortune comes into play, write its name and its details on a note card. Put it on the table where any player can take and examine it.

At the beginning of the first session, put three cruel fortunes into play: Urgency (soon, His Majesty's Ship *The Resolute*, a warship of 22 guns, Profile 11), Want (staples and fresh water), and Wear & breakage. Furthermore, if any of the players' characters have suffered accursing, put Accursing into play as well.

The GM owns and makes decisions for all the cruel fortunes.

Accursing

Bring accursing into play if ever any player's pirate is cursed by one with the talent or authority to make binding curses.

If accursing is in play, you get two additional Xs in every fight.

Furthermore, once per session or two, you may bring your choice of one of these into play: becalmment, debauchery, malcontentment, the storm, or want; or else you may play a dirty trick with some other cruel fortune. (I leave this latter to your own worthy imagination.)

To be rid of a curse: the one who pronounced the curse can revoke it, or else one with greater talent or greater authority can counteract it.

Arrest

You can choose to bring arrest into play whenever a player's pirate or pirate crew comes under the power or submits to the will of any lawful party.

The pirate and crew are arrested and imprisoned. Bring the constabulary into play (if you have not already). Bring urgency (soon, becalmment) into play.

If the pirate somehow escapes imprisonment before the urgency fulfills, discard it unfulfilled. Otherwise, the pirate must resolve the effects of becalmment before escaping.

If the pirate doesn't escape, offer him a bargain or execute him.

Becalmment

Becalmment can't come into play if urgency is in play already.

Becalmment can also refer to imprisonment on shore.

When becalmment comes into play, every player must roll Soul vs Devil on behalf of her pirate.

If each and every player wins the roll, the becalmment passes, eventually, without incident.

Otherwise, each player who lost the roll must choose one of: disease, madness or malcontentment. Those come into play at once. Once they're well established, the becalmment passes out of play.

The constabulary

When any player's pirate creates any kind of disturbance in port, you can bring the constabulary into play.

When the constabulary comes into play, you get an NPC constable with a crew. Create them as usual NPCs.

Debauchery

When debauchery comes into play, the pirates fall into gluttonous, orgiastic excess. This automatically affects most or all NPC pirates, and any player's pirate if the player chooses not to resist.

If the player chooses to resist, she rolls Soul vs Devil on behalf of her pirate.

If she loses the roll, her pirate falls into excess with the rest (and she should portray him so, with zest). If he commits sins he has not before committed, they leave their mark on his soul.

If she wins the roll, she may have her pirate act as she chooses.

Disease

When disease comes into play, it boards the players' ship and attacks its crew, as another ship's crew would. For the disease's Brinksmanship, roll 2 dice and take the higher.

If any one of debauchery, madness or want is in play, give the disease a Profile 1 better than the crew's. If two or three are in play, give it a Profile 2 better.

If the disease wins the battle, adjust the crew's Profile according to the outcome.

Divine judgment

Bring divine judgment into play whenever you like. Certainly bring it into play whenever the captain's player calls for you to.

God offers a bargain to the captain. God can remove any cruel fortune from play. If they strike the bargain, use divine judgment's card to record it.

If later the captain isn't fulfilling the bargain, instead of withholding dice equal to the captain's soul, God may damn the captain: the captain suffers damnation.

A fortress

Bring a fortress into play whenever fortune takes the pirates into contact with one. Create it as an NPC as usual.

A fortress has a commander, a garrison, and guns. Create the commander and garrison as NPCs as usual.

A fortress can't be pursued like a ship can, and will never pursue a ship of course, but instead approach it: cannon range, then broadside range, then boarding range.

Hell

You can bring Hell into play when, all three, the ship's captain has suffered damnation, debauchery is in play, and any player's pirate kills someone.

When Hell comes into play, the pirates fall into frenzied, berserk violence: killing, torture, cannibalism and rape. This automatically affects most or all NPC pirates, and any player's pirate if the player chooses not to resist.

If the player chooses to resist, she rolls Soul vs Devil on behalf of her pirate.

If she loses the roll, her pirate falls into Hell with the rest (and she should portray him so, unflinching). If he commits sins he has not before committed, they leave their mark on his soul.

If she wins the roll, she may have her pirate act as she chooses.

The King's agents

You can bring the king's agents into play whenever any player's pirate is making free in port.

Offer that pirate a bargain, in the name of the King.

Write the bargain on the king's agents' card, and leave it in play until the bargain's fulfilled.

Madness

When madness comes into play, begin inserting untrue things into your descriptions, including fanciful and horrific things. You can have the ship's NPC crew behave in exactly the way you like, in response to these hallucinations and insane impulses, not bound to your past portrayals of them or to any sense or reason.

The madness has lasting consequences as though its nightmares were real: a hallucinated ship can sink the players' ship just as thoroughly as a real one. Bring any cruel fortunes into play you choose, following the (il)logic of the madness.

As the madness progresses, periodically call for the players to roll Ambition on their pirates' behalf. Compare their rolls against one another. Each time, the player with the best roll, her pirate recovers his senses and from that moment on is immune to the madness' effects.

When the last player's pirate returns to sanity, take madness out of play along with all the cruel fortunes it has borne.

Malcontentment

You can bring malcontentment into play whenever it seems called for, but first warn the players' pirates and give them a chance to make right with the crew.

If any player calls for you to bring malcontentment into play, do so at once.

If both malcontentment and arrest are in play, release some of the crew from imprisonment and bring spies & assassins into play at once.

If both malcontentment and becalmment, or malcontentment and the storm are in play, then the captain must bargain with the crew or be thrown overboard.

If both malcontentment and hell are in play, then the crew attacks the captain and whoever stands with him, in a bloodthirsty frenzy of mutiny.

If both malcontentment and ships are in play, then the captain must bargain with the crew before entering battle.

If both malcontentment and want are in play, then any prize the pirates take, or any port they land in, or any native island they happen across - remove want from play but bring debauchery into play in its place.

If malcontentment is already in play, and it should by rights come into play again, instead bring into play one of spies & assassins (representing treachery), want (representing intentional waste and malingering), or wear & breakage (representing neglect or even sabotage).

Parted ways

Bring parted ways into play when the pirates split up. You can use its card to divide the table (left and right, or north, south, east and west, one side for each pirate or group of pirates) so you can keep track of which cruel fortunes are in play on which.

Private persons

Bring a private person into play whenever a player's pirate has dealings with a private person.

Create the private person as an NPC as usual.

Use the person's card to track any bargains they strike.

Ships

When the players' ship comes under pursuit or attack, bring a ship or ships into play. Create the ship as an NPC as usual.

A ship has a captain, a crew, and guns. Create the captain and crew as NPCs as usual.

Soldiers

When the players' ship gets boarded, or when the pirates encounter any kind of military force, bring soldiers into play.

Soldiers consist of a commander with his company. Create them as NPCs as usual.

Spies & assassins

When spies & assassins are in play, once per session, you may choose one of these:

- Bring ships into play with no warning;
- Bring wear & breakage into play with no warning;
- Bring the king's agents into play, onboard ship;
- Make an attack on the ship's captain.

If you choose this last, spies and assassins leaves play, but you get an NPC assassin with Brinksmanship 5; create his Profile as usual.

The players' pirates can take action to discover and remove spies & assassins, but only beginning at the third session they're in play.

The storm

When the storm comes into play, it pursues the players' ship and (if it overtakes) attacks it, as another ship would. For the storm's Brinksmanship, roll 2 dice and take the higher; for the storm's Profile, roll 1 die and add 8.

Play the storm as a relentless enemy, a bloodthirsty captain with no thought for himself or his own.

Urgency

You can bring urgency into play whenever you like, provided that circumstances support it.

When urgency comes into play, name another cruel fortune; soon that one will come into play. Roll a die. Mark its number on the urgency card.

Whenever you like, at any lull or moment of tension, roll a die:

If it matches any number on the urgency card, the urgency is fulfilled. It leaves play and its consequent cruel fortune comes into play at once.

If it doesn't match, add its number to those already the urgency card.

Want

Bring want into play when the players' ship has been at sea for some time.

When you bring want into play, name the supply the ship's wanting. Think broadly: being lost, for instance, is wanting direction; being caught by a storm is wanting foresight.

If want survives to the end of the session, bring another cruel fortune into play, depending on the exact want. Choose one of becalmment, disease, discontentment, the storm, a new want, or wear & breakage.

Wear & breakage

Bring wear & breakage into play as called for by ship to ship fighting and other cruel fortunes.

While wear and breakage is in play, subtract 1 from *The Dagger's* Profile.



Opportunities

The players and the GM share ownership of all the opportunities.

Election

When it comes time to vote on anything, suppose that the ship's company will vote in proportion alongside the players' pirates, a portion for each. Accordingly, each player gets one vote, representing her own pirate and her portion of the company. GM, don't participate in elections, let the players decide it themselves.

Probably the first vote of the game will be to elect a new captain. Perhaps second, after a vote to decide the fate of the assassin Tom Reed – but probably first.

It'll be appropriate and reasonable for the players' pirates to expect everything significant onship to be decided by vote thereafter. That's how Brimstone Jack ran the ship, and how pretty much all the pirates of the era did.

However, notice that the rules that follow give the captain's player several decisions to make, outright, without any reference to voting at all. GM, you're bound to follow the captain's player's decisions, not the result of a vote, if the captain should happen to disregard the desires of his company.

For the other players, you're bound to do no such thing. Play your pirates as you would: if their captain's trampling their chartered rights, bring it to him, via success rolls and fighting, as you would to any enemy.

Prizes

At any time the players' ship's at sea, the captain can declare that they're hunting for a prize. The captain's player says how fat a prize, and the GM creates its details.

While the pirates are cruising for a prize, any and all cruel fortunes in play remain in play, and new ones can come into play as usual.

Captain's player: name a number, 2 to 6. This is how many dice' plunder the prize will be worth, and also how well-guarded the prize will be. Cruising for a prize worth 2 is a special case: it means only looking for a suitable beach on which to careen your ship and take on fresh food and water.

GM: spend that number, 2 to 6, to create the prize's protection:

Spend 2 for a merchant vessel – a sloop if it's a prize of 3 or 4, a ship if it's a prize of 5 or 6.

Spend 1 for an additional vessel of the same class, in convoy, and distribute the prize among them.

Spend 2 for an armed escort, a sloop or ship to match the prize. Spend 3 for an exceptional escort.

Spend 3 for a ship of the line or a fortress guarding the prize.

Spend 4 for an exceptional ship of the line or fortress.

For each ship, spend 1 for an exceptional captain; spend 1 for an exceptional crew. Otherwise the captain and crew are usual.

Spend 1 for a company of marines onboard one of the ships.

Spend 2 for an exceptional company of marines.

Spend 1 for a link to a particular cruel fortune (for instance, spend 1 to put a disease or an accursing witch on board).

Spend 1 to put some particular costly delay between the pirates and the prize.

Players: when your pirates take the prize, roll that many dice, 2 to 6. Add them. This is the plunder you seize.

The captain and the quartermaster say how to spend the plunder. The captain has the final say (and remember always to bargain:

Spend 3: remove from play any one of discontentment, want, or wear & breakage.

Spend 2 or more: give any player's pirate Leisure.

Spend 1: captain, gain an X.

Save the rest, and mark it on your ship's sheet.

By stealth (that is, by winning a roll of Ambition vs Brutality), or by winning a fight with whoever stands guard, any player's pirate can have full access to the ship's stored plunder, to spend, make bargains with, or, hell, throw overboard, if he likes. Otherwise only the captain can.

Leisure

For a pirate, leisure means being onshore and free to pursue your own ambitions, instead of onboardship and working.

Your pirate's opportunities while he's at his leisure depend on how much plunder his captain gave him, and how he spends it:

Spend 1 for the labor lost to the ship.

Spend 1 for a bath, a room, and cash for eat and drink.

These first two are the minimum, not optional, and a frugal leave. A frugal leave entitles you to a single social engagement, lasting a scene's or a few scenes' worth of play. From there:

Spend 1 for two additional social engagements' leave.

Spend 1 for clothing and grooming suitable to society.

Spend 1 to treat others, a party, to a meal.

Spend 1 for a night of spectacular debauchery.

Spend 1 to give a suitable gift to whomever you like.

Spend 1 to gain entry into a social engagement above your station.

Spend 1 to improve your accommodations to luxurious apartments, fine food and good wine.

Spend 1 to secure anonymity, changing your appearance sufficient that you may go unrecognized.

If your pirate and another player's cast in together, each of you must spend your 2 minimum, but thereafter each 1 spent by either provides its benefit to both. Same with three or more.

The only limit is that your pirates must all share a single suite, dine and drink at the same establishment, all visit the one same tailor, all share the same whores and opium, all attend the same engagements.

Betrayal

You might find that the best and surest way for your pirate to achieve his ambitions is to make bargains with representatives of the king. You'll find them readily in any port, and while it's possible that any given one will betray you in turn, for the most part they'll deal fair. Pardoning one pirate weighs very favorably against capturing a ship and its entire bloody crew.

Urgent Considerations

Who will be the new captain? What positions will everyone else take?

What will you do with the assassin Tom Reed?

What will you do about the English warship sailing even now from nearby Kingston Bay?

How will you repair and provision your ship?

And Then ...?

Possibly True Facts About Pirates

The average pirate is in his mid-to-late twenties. The life is hard and you wear out fast. A pirate who gets rich and gets out and retires to a plantation in Jamaica is still going to live only to fifty or so.

You know the difference between pirates and privateers, right? A privateer is a private ship with commission from the crown (a “letter of marque”) to attack and sink or seize enemy ships, for which it receives a share and a bounty. Privateering is lawful, it’s a way for a king to effectively expand his navy without, y’know, expanding his navy. A pirate, on the other hand, attacks and robs whomever, with no regard for who’s at war with whom.

Pirates may expect to be arrested, imprisoned, tried and hanged, if taken by any lawful party.

Pirate ships are democracies. The pirate company elects its captain and can call for him to step down and accept replacement if it’s not satisfied. The company also votes where to sail, how to provision the ship, and what ships to attack as they go.

However, you and I both know what small group democracies are like. I’ll lay you twenty that more decisions get made by doubledealing and bullying than by honest vote.

Still, when you trace a pirate ship’s path, it usually won’t seem to have much sense or forethought behind it. Maybe they do travel at the whim of the vote.

Pirate ships travel quite far, all told. Winter in the Carribean, summer up the coast as far as Newfoundland; across the Atlantic to the Guinea Coast of Africa, even down around one or the other horn – into the Pacific, or to Madagascar and into the Indian Ocean.

Pirates don’t bury their treasure. Maybe once or twice in all of history. Mostly they gamble, drink and whore it away. I can only imagine the boon to the local economy a flush pirate crew represents.

Typically the ship’s company will write out terms for sharing the plunder, upfront and by committee: first, some amount set aside for the ship’s maintenance, some amount set aside as salary for its carpenter and surgeon, and some amount to recompense pirates’ lost limbs and eyes. After that, every pirate gets an equal share of what’s left, with maybe a quadruple or quintuple share for the captain, but no more.

Pieces of eight, silver coins worth 8 Spanish reales each, have about the same buying power as twenties do today. Doubloons are larger gold coins worth considerably more; a handful of doubloons would set you up well for a year or more.

A single pirate’s share of a single raided ship could amount to three, four hundred pieces of eight worth – six or eight thousand dollars American, now.

Most of your plunder will be in trade goods, not in coin or boullion. Bolts of cloth, bales of tobacco, ambergris, whale oil, spices, dyes, jewelry, silverware, even slaves.

Yes, a pirate ship is much more likely to have a crew of mixed race than, for instance, a merchant ship or a ship of the Royal Navy is. Much more likely – sometimes as much as one quarter or one third black. However, it’s not a given that the black sailors on a pirate ship will be free. Sometimes pirates raided slave ships and

then sold the slaves themselves for their own profit, for instance. Sometimes they seized slaves, didn't free them, and made them do the worst work onboardship.

As always, the way to tell is: if he's holding a weapon, he's not a slave.

We know only two female pirates from the period around 1700, Anne Bonny and Mary Read. Both happened to sail on the ship of a smalltimer called Calico Jack – Anne Bonny left her husband to go to sea with him, and Mary Read later signed on his ship disguised as a man. We know his name only because of them; we wouldn't otherwise remember a guy who mostly robbed fishing boats.

So only those two, but in that period and after, up until the American Civil War, we know of dozens and dozens of women disguised as men in the regular navy, in the army, in merchant service. Usually they're found out when they're wounded, and not until – so how many women pirates must we suppose went undiscovered?

Some pirate ships get bought and fitted out to the purpose by their captains. Some get seized in battle, of course. But a few get seized by mutiny. Life on a lawful ship can be hellish for a regular sailor. Not only is the work backbreaking and very poorly paid, but regular sailors often get impressed unwilling from their lives on land, and the punishments onboardship are appalling. Many pirates learned their brutality at the hands of their former, lawful, captains.

Oversight and military codes make navy ships better than private ships, usually, but even at their best they're still misery for a common sailor.

If you meet a pirate with a split tongue or his tongue burned out, it's for talking mutiny on a lawful ship.

In this year, 1701, there are around 25 pirate ships operating in the Caribbean. The majority of them are one- and two-masted sloops with companies around 80 souls; a minority are three-masted ships with companies up to 250.

There are only 4 or 5 English men-of-war stationed in the Caribbean against pirates, though. Instead, sometimes merchants convoy together for protection, with an armed sloop only if they can arrange it so. Usually they just accept the risks. Piracy's a persistent nuisance but not a real threat to worldwide shipping.

A pirate ship has about the same size company as its equivalent in regular navy, but one much, much larger than its equivalent in merchant service. A merchant ship will go to sail with too few sailors to fire all its guns, and with half its gun ports empty, the more room for goods. A pirate ship never will.

A two-masted sloop like *The Dagger* will have a company of 80 to 120 as a pirate vessel, compared to the 10-15 on a merchant sloop. A three-masted 200- to 300-ton pirate ship will have a crew of 200 or so, like its counterpart in the navy, where a similar-sized merchantman will have a crew under 50.

Even with so many hands, maintaining a ship is plenty of work. In addition to the day-to-day, several times a year you have to careen the ship: run it aground, haul it over onto its sides in turn, burning and scraping its hull clean and replacing any broken or rotting planks. It's days' hard labor, and not a time you want to be come upon by enemies.

Many merchant ships will surrender without any fight at all, especially if you seem more ready to do violence than they are to endure it. If it comes to it, an engagement at sea will include some or all of: a pursuit, short or long; occasional cannonshots to establish range; the ship with the longer-range guns holding pace

and firing on the other; both ships exchanging fire at range; fire directed at the hull to sink, or at the masts and rigging to disable; closing range to board, but exchanging broadsides first, a terrible business; sharpshooters up the masts of one ship or both bringing fire on the sailors, gunners and officers of the other ship; grappling and drawing close for boarding.

A pirate ship won't usually turn its full guns on a merchant ship, but between pirates and privateers or navy ships the fighting will be hard.

A good gunnery crew is quite accurate, able to fire effectively upon the other ship's masts at some range and in a pitching sea. It can fire, reload and fire again in a matter of three, four, five minutes. Navies, however, are better at training and disciplining their gunnery crews than pirate captains are.

Your guns, both your cannon and your personal guns, fire balls at low velocity (compared to modern-day weapons) but of enormous caliber: cannonballs six, eight or twelve pounds apiece, musket balls like the ball of a ball peen hammer. The swivel guns mounted on the rails of the deck fire shot as big as an egg. And then, there's chain shot, for taking out masts and riggings but not good for sailors either, bar shot for the same, heated shot for setting the other ship afire, case shot and grape shot for no purpose but killing.

I don't know what odds to give you if you're wounded in battle or injured in labor aboardship. Wooden legs, eyepatches, hooks for hands, those are all real things. Probably the ship's surgeon can't do any more for you than dose you well with rum and then saw it off before it kills you with infection.

Other than the innate hazards of the trade – including advanced alcoholism, tropical fevers, and syphilis, not just getting blown to pieces in battle – living aboard a pirate ship is just as healthy, probably healthier, than living aboard a merchant or navy ship. If nothing else, the food is better: in the regular navy, ship's rat is meat for the captain, and the sailors have to content themselves with weevily tack. There's no earthly reason for a pirate company to put up with such straits, they'll just abandon their previous course and raid coastal towns and villages instead. If their captain has other ideas, hell, maybe they'll drop him off on some barren island along their way.

Pirates don't make people walk the plank, mostly, or not especially. If you're a pirate's prisoner you're more likely to be thrown overboard without ceremony than made to walk, and you're more likely still to be executed with a sword or gun. Pirates take prisoners for ransom, rarely, in which case you'll be relatively well treated, but it's a slim hope.

A merchant ship's most valuable treasure might be a dozen coins or small diamond-set cross, easily hidden onboard. Pirates will take a ship's passengers and officers captive and then torture them until they reveal where such treasure's hidden. Sometimes they'll torture and execute a captured ship's captain just for fleeing or firing back, or for no more reason than to make the next captain the more terrified.

If you're a member of a pirate crew, marooning is common, as a semi-capital punishment. Maybe you'll survive somehow. And although there are many gruesome capital punishments, and for certain pirates practice them all, if you're to be executed you're most likely to be simply hanged, on sea as on land.

I've done no real research! Most of these "facts," I've distilled from *Under the Black Flag* by David Cordingly (which is probably a reliable secondary source), but some of them I'm talking out my butt (which is certainly not one). I make no avowals which.

Direct influences:

Paul Czege

Graham Walmsley

Meguey Baker

Emily Care Boss

Julia Bond Ellingboe

Joshua A.C. Newman

Anna Kreider

The Forge www.indie-rpgs.com

The Mountain Witch by *Tim Kleinart*

Steal Away Jordan by *Julia Bond Ellingboe*

Lobscouse & Spotted Dog

by *Anne Chotzinoff Grossman & Lisa Grossman Thomas*

2005 Lonesome Cowboy by *Joanna Estep & Carolyn Drew*

Peter Weir's Master & Commander: the far side of the world

Random Order Comics & Games by *James V. West*

Roman Polanski's Pirates

Rogue's Gallery by *various artists*

Under the Black Flag by *David Cordingly*

Disney's Pirates of the Caribbean, of course

InSpectres by *Jared Sorensen*

Sorcerer by *Ron Edwards*

That book I read about pirates back in like 2002, whatever it was called. Man that guy was into "the first democracies."

Poison'd: a pirate rpg

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pamphlet design by *D. Vincent Baker*

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This game is an ashcan

*For limited release, for purposes of
playtesting, development & review.*

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