Thugs & Thieves

A Game of Pulp Fantasy Adventure

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Introduction

The Premise

Thugs & Thieves is a fantasy RPG in which the characters are, well, thugs and thieves. In the most basic definition, these are men and women who eke out a living by doing work that involves the use of force and/or guile. Common jobs include but are not limited to the following:

- Caravan guard
- Personal bodyguard
- "Acquiring" rare and interesting artifacts
- Delivering messages (especially through hostile environs)
- Brute squad
- Event security
- Kidnapping
- Assassination
- Extermination of monsters

Let's not beat around the bush. These are dangerous jobs, and the risk of injury, imprisonment, death, and worse is very real. So why take these jobs? Why live by the sword? Apart from a love of adventure, there's a simple pragmatic answer: For the money. Thugs and thieves have no marketable skills other than their fighting and stealing abilities. In order to make money to live, they are forced to capitalize on their talents. Further, each character has a weakness, be it a fondness for sex, gambling, good food and drink, or other entertainment. These pursuits cost money as well.

Thugs & Thieves is a game of sword and sorcery adventure. It's about kicking ass, taking names, partying hardy, and the consequences thereof. Characters make their way in the world by putting themselves in danger. The risks are great, but the rewards can be even greater if you're strong enough.

The Milieu

Think of 80's B-grade fantasy movies and you'll get an idea of what a good *Thugs & Thieves* game should be like. Specifically, think of *The Beastmaster*, *Conan the Barbarian*, and *The Sword and the Sorcerer*. Think giant snakes. Unspeakably evil sorcerers. Incredibly attractive people. Fell beasts and monsters of every description. Kings and queens who live in opulent splendour. Peasants who live in squalor and poverty. Big, stupid-looking weapons.

The protagonists of these films, despite their obvious flaws, are unquestionably heroes. They are better, stronger, faster, tougher, braver, etc. than everyday folks. And while they don't have any special magical abilities, they are extremely competent in what they do, and what they do (once you strip away the highfalutin' personal vendettas and special destinies) is thuggery and thievery. These are characters who know how to get down and dirty. Unlike in the movies, however, when the adventure comes to a close for your characters, they won't ride off into the sunset; they'll look for more.

Thugs & Thieves is designed to emphasize the garishness and hedonistic nature of the settings and societies commonly portrayed in pulp fantasy films. It is also designed to support and encourage the same type of over-the-top action and adventure that suffuses these films. It's not a terribly realistic genre, but it sure is fun!

How to Use This Book

The *Thugs & Thieves* text was designed to be read from start to finish by at least one player in the group (usually the GM). As such, each section is intended to follow from the preceding section and lead into the subsequent section in a logical manner. However, a role-playing game book must serve as a reference for use during play in addition to providing a (hopefully) interesting read. The first time a game term appears, it is printed in **boldface type**. (This makes it easier to skim the text for definitions.) Subsequent appearances of game terms will be CAPITALIZED to differentiate them from normal word usage.

Character Creation

Concept

As a player, the first and most important thing to come up with is a general idea of what your character is going to be like. Probably the best question to ask yourself is, "what would be cool?" What sort of character would be the type to travel with Conan? Or Talon (from *The Sword and the Sorcerer*)? If stuck for inspiration, it's always an option to base a character directly on a character in a movie or TV show. Just change the name and the appearance, and you've got a character concept that will practically play itself.

Example: Michelle is creating a character. She knows she wants to play a warrior woman, and she's already thought of a name: Thedara. But what makes Thedara special? What makes her cool? Well, what if she were a princess from a lost tribe of amazons? Michelle thinks that would be cool, so she runs with it. Thedara, warrior princess of the lost tribe of Shandolynne. Cool.

The Vice

Once you have a general concept in mind, you should come up with a weakness for the character. Each *Thugs & Thieves* character has a **Vice**. A VICE is an activity or habit that eats up most if not all of a character's available cash. Possible VICES include but are not limited to the following list:

- Wine: The character likes to drink alcoholic beverages.
- Sex: The character enjoys engaging in acts of carnal pleasure and often pays for the privilege.
- Entertainment: The character enjoys good music, theatre, dancing, or things of that nature.
- Food: The character likes to eat, be it fine cuisine or mass quantities.
- Gambling: The character spends money in games of chance.
- Drugs: The character enjoys temporary, chemically induced alteration of brain functions.
- Luxuries: The character is fond of the finer things in life.
- Charity: The character is generous to a fault.

Players choose VICES for their characters and write them down on the character sheet. The GM must approve each VICE.

Guidelines for Choosing a Vice

The list above is perhaps misleadingly brief and simple. Many different VICES are possible, but all of them must meet a few simple criteria. First, the VICE must cost money. Second, the VICE may not provide a character with any lasting or permanent possessions. Third, the VICE should not conflict with the character concept. Indeed, in some cases players will come up with a VICE first, and then build a character concept from there.

Some atypical VICES that have come up in playtesting include the following:

- A character that was into gadgetry had "Experimentation" as his Vice. This character spent all of his money on equipment and raw materials for "scientific" experiments and prototypes. (None of which worked, of course.)
- Another character's Vice was "Hoarding," which meant that whenever he acquired gold and treasure, he would bury or otherwise hide it in various caches around and about the countryside. He would be quite wealthy, save for the fact that he refused to dig up a cache for any reason.

As can be seen, the players have a lot of flexibility in selecting VICES. Some players may not be terribly interested in the VICE aspect and may choose something simple like drinking or gambling. Others may make the VICE the cornerstone of the entire character.

Example: Michelle decides that Thedara has a weakness for expensive perfumes, soaps, and incense.

Abilities

A character has six **Abilities**. ABILITIES are broad-ranging categories that define a character's varying levels of capability in the areas in which thugs and thieves excel. The different ABILITIES are listed and described below.

- **Beast Lore:** Knowledge and skill concerning animals, beasts, and monsters. Used for predicting the habits and behaviors of monsters, animal handling, animal empathy, animal training, animal knowledge, hunting, riding, etc.
- **Charisma:** Effectiveness in social situations. Used for etiquette, coercion, argument, interrogation, intimidation, seduction, lying, catching others in lies, bluffing, cons, etc.
- **Cunning:** Mental acuity and stability. Used for picking out details in one's surroundings, discerning clues, tracking, willpower, knowledge, memory, learning, etc.
- **Physique:** Physical fitness and effectiveness in combat. Used for acrobatics, running, jumping, climbing, dancing, tightrope walking, combat, etc.
- **Thievery:** Ability to perform acts of stealth, guile, and/or questionable ethics. Used for picking pockets, picking locks, hiding, sneaking, sleight of hand, disguise, detecting/disabling/setting booby traps, etc.
- **Toughness:** Endurance and ability to withstand physical punishment. Used to avoid being wounded, resist poison or disease, endure physical punishment or hardship, etc.

Assigning Abilities

Each character is rated numerically in each ABILITY; the higher the number, the better the ABILITY. To assign a character's ABILITY ratings, start each ABILITY at 7 and customize by lowering one ABILITY to raise another an equal amount. (Put another way, distribute 42 points among the ABILITIES.) For a starting character, no ABILITY may be less than 5 or greater than 9.

Example: Somewhere in the process of coming up with Thedara, Michelle has decided she wields a large poleaxe. She likes the idea so much that she decides the axe-wielding is Thedara's highest priority, so she starts right off with PHYSIQUE at the maximum allowable score of 9. That leaves her with 2 points to shave off the other ABILITIES. She decides that THIEVERY is probably not important to a tribal princess, and neither is CUNNING, so she drops them to 6 each. CHARISMA, on the other hand, is important for a princess, and TOUGHNESS is important for a Shandolynne tribeswoman. Michelle increases them both to 8, leaving her with another 2 points to lose elsewhere. After some consideration, she drops another point from THIEVERY and a point from BEAST LORE. In the end, Thedara's Abilities are as follows: BEAST LORE 6, CHARISMA 8, CUNNING 6, PHYSIQUE 9, THIEVERY 5, TOUGHNESS 8.

Rolling the Bones: Task Resolution in Brief

Here's a quick summary of task resolution to give an idea of what the ABILITY numbers mean:

Whenever you are instructed to make a roll on an ABILITY, that means roll two six-sided dice, add them together, and compare the result to the ABILITY'S level. If the roll is less than or equal to the ABILITY, the character is successful. If the roll is greater than the ABILITY, the character fails. A roll of snake eyes (2) is always successful, and a roll of boxcars (12) is always a failure, regardless of the ABILITY.

For a more detailed description of task resolution, see "Task Resolution" on page 11.

Descriptors

In addition to the numbers, a character has **Descriptors** for each of the ABILITIES. A DESCRIPTOR is simply a word or phrase that adds some description to the character's numbers. DESCRIPTORS help the players and GM more easily understand what the character is like, and as a result make it easier to role-play the character. They also have a practical mechanical application: When a character is using an ABILITY in a way that accords with the DESCRIPTOR, the player can petition the GM for a +1 bonus to the task (which should in most cases be granted). For all of these reasons, DESCRIPTORS should be fairly focused concepts rather than blanket value judgements.

Sample DESCRIPTORS for each ABILITY are listed below.

- **BEAST LORE DESCRIPTORS**: Good with a chosen animal (horses, cattle, dogs, falcons, etc.), knows about a chosen type of monster (dragons, giant snakes, faeries, etc.), can communicate with a certain animal (i.e. has a familiar), etc.
- **CHARISMA DESCRIPTORS**: Comely, charming, well-mannered, persuasive, good liar, good interrogator, can be intimidating when desired, seductive, etc.
- **CUNNING DESCRIPTORS**: Knowledge in a chosen subject (masonry, philosophy, history, ancient alphabets, etc.), good at remembering names, sharp eyes, good ears, keen sense of smell, appraisal, etc.
- **PHYSIQUE DESCRIPTORS**: Very strong, very agile, good with a chosen weapon (sword, axe, etc.), good sense of balance, very tall, excellent swimmer, etc.
- **THIEVERY DESCRIPTORS**: Good at getting lost in a crowd, can move quietly, good at following others without their knowledge, knows how to use camouflage, good at disguises, can find things that are hidden, expert cutpurse, good at picking locks, good with traps, etc.
- **TOUGHNESS DESCRIPTORS:** High endurance, resists injury, doesn't easily fall ill, resistant to poison, strong stomach, etc.

Many other DESCRIPTORS are certainly possible. DESCRIPTORS are always subject to GM approval.

No two characters in the group may have the same DESCRIPTOR for the same ABILITY. If this rule results in a dispute during character creation, settle it by rolling against the relevant ABILITY for each character. Whoever gets the better result gets first choice, and the other player must select a different DESCRIPTOR.

Example: In the jungles of Thedara's homeland, hunting was an important source of food, so Michelle selects "Jungle stealth" for her THIEVERY DESCRIPTOR. PHYSIQUE is a no-brainer: "Good with poleaxe." BEAST LORE? "Jungle wildcats" seems a likely area of expertise. For CHARISMA, Michelle chooses "Royal bearing" to reflect the fact that Thedara is a princess. For CUNNING, it'll be "Sense of smell," since Thedara's Vice is scented oils and such. Michelle has an image in her mind of hunting bands of Shandolynne tribeswomen running through the jungle, so she writes "Long distance runner" for TOUGHNESS.

Optional Rule: Cooperative Descriptor Selection

If all the characters in the group are being created together, a fun way to prevent DESCRIPTOR disputes is to go around the room once for each ABILITY and have each player announce his

chosen DESCRIPTOR for the ABILITY. If someone announces a DESCRIPTOR you were going to use, pick a different DESCRIPTOR. (Be sure to devise some fair method to prevent one player going first all the time.) This serves the added purpose of familiarizing the players with all of the characters.

Optional rule: Dynamic Descriptor Selection

Not all DESCRIPTORS must be chosen during character creation. Generally, players will have a very good idea of what some if not most of their characters' DESCRIPTORS are going to be. Sometimes it is difficult to come up with a suitable DESCRIPTOR for every ABILITY, however. In that case, the player may leave the DESCRIPTOR blank, and decide what the DESCRIPTOR will be sometime during play. This will usually happen when the ABILITY is to be used and the player wants to get the +1 DESCRIPTOR bonus. As normal, once a DESCRIPTOR has been selected, it cannot be changed except during character advancement. This optional rule allows characters to be "forged by their experiences" in play. If this optional rule is used, the GM may or may not wish to limit the number of DESCRIPTORS that may be left blank.

Mastery

Mastery is a special ABILITY that relates specifically to the character's VICE. Like all ABILITIES, is has a numeric rating, but this rating is always equal to the character's lowest normal ABILITY. Unlike the other ABILITIES, MASTERY has no DESCRIPTOR, and it has one and only one use. For further discussion on how MASTERY is used, see "Special Purchases: Mastering the Vice" on page xx.

Example: Since Thedara's lowest ABILITY is THIEVERY at 5, Thedara's MASTERY is also 5.

Equipment

At character creation, the players can choose whatever mundane personal items they want for their characters, keeping in mind the following guidelines:

1. A starting character may not own more than can be fit in a pack or sack and carried along at a moment's notice. Thugs and thieves travel light.
2. A character may only carry items that are necessary to do his jobs. Such items would include weapons, armor, camping gear, and a few tools like rope, lock picks (if the character is so inclined), grappling hook, lantern, etc.

It is usually not necessary for the players to keep detailed equipment lists for their characters (unless they wish to). At times during play, it will become questionable whether or not a character would be carrying a given item. If (and only if) the item falls under the second guideline above, the dice may be used to determine whether or not a character has the item in question. Roll vs. the character's CUNNING. On a success, the character has the item; on a failure, the character lacked the foresight to bring it along and must somehow obtain it. The circumstances of the adventure and the rarity of the item will dictate whether or not obtaining the item is easy, difficult, or impossible. For example, if the characters are deep in the wilderness, a general store might be a little hard to come by. The GM has final say over whether or not a particular item can be found, although GMs are encouraged to be lenient in this regard. The GM also determines what happens as a result of the characters straying from the job to obtain said

item. All sorts of interesting things can happen in the temple ruins while the characters are in town trying to find a widget. As far as money is concerned, assume that enough can be scraped together to make whatever mundane purchases come up in the course of the game.

Arms and Armor

When outfitting characters with weaponry and armor, it's important to note that all combat effectiveness is governed exclusively by the PHYSIQUE and TOUGHNESS ABILITIES. From the standpoint of the game mechanics, it doesn't matter what weapon the character carries or what armor he chooses to wear (if any). This may seem strange and bears some explanation.

If you've seen any of those movies, you know that the weapons can be ridiculous (like that three-bladed monstrosity in *The Sword and the Sorcerer*, or that giant hammer in *Conan the Barbarian*). While it's certainly not a requirement that characters carry outlandish weaponry, it is neither a help nor a hindrance should the players choose for them to do so.

As for armor, well, heroes in the films often wear clothing that emphasizes the physique. Fur loincloths and bikinis are commonplace. For a major confrontation, a character may get really conservative and put on a helmet or some steel wristbands or something. However, the characters never seem to suffer particularly for their lack of protective gear. On the other hand, fully armored guards and similarly generic or insignificant opponents tend to drop like wheat to the scythe regardless of armor.

The point being, style is everything. It doesn't matter how practical or impractical the characters' equipment and clothing is. The only important consideration when equipping the characters is style. The characters should look cool, and they should also look like total badasses.

Economics

The Tyranny of Vice

Thugs & Thieves does not require the use of a detailed monetary system. Instead, it is assumed that the characters make enough money through work to keep themselves fed, clothed, and equipped. When between jobs, a character has about two or three days of in-game time where money is not a concern. After that, things start to slip, and getting food starts to become a problem, let alone scratching the itch of a VICE.

Let's make a few things clear:

- The characters are not farmers, shopkeepers, craftsmen, or merchants, nor do they have friends or relatives who are farmers, shopkeepers, craftsmen, or merchants. Basically, the only way for the characters to get food (and any other service, for that matter) is to work for it or purchase it.
- The characters are not common criminals and consider themselves above stealing food, goods, or services except under extraordinary circumstances. If they need money, they work for it.
- The characters do not save money. If they get their hands on a hoard of gold and jewels, it's pretty much guaranteed to be gone within a week at the outside. The amount of money has more impact on the quality of the stuff upon which it is squandered than on the amount of time that it lasts.

Hence, a monetary system is not particularly necessary for this game. When the characters have money, they live large until it's gone. What's more, the characters wouldn't have it any other way. Live hard, play hard. Adventure and VICE, in that order, is what they live for.

Finally, it should be understood that the characters are not addicts. When they run out of money, they don't go into withdrawal; they look for work. Their VICE-related needs never outweigh their more basic needs, nor does the pursuit of VICE overshadow the characters' better judgement. Also, the characters are always at full effectiveness when partaking in their VICES (even in the case of things like alcohol and drugs). In other words, they can "hold their liquor."

Special Purchases: Mastering the Vice

Don't think that the characters are unable to spend money on things other than their VICES; it can just be difficult. Whenever a character receives any income, the player may choose something the character wants to purchase and roll against MASTERY to see if the character has the willpower to make the purchase before blowing the money on fun stuff. If the MASTERY roll is successful, the player may add the purchased item to the character sheet. Players may attempt to purchase as many items as they wish, one at a time, until they fail a MASTERY roll. Each purchased item beyond the first garners a cumulative -2 penalty. So, the second item is at -2, the third item at -4, etc. Any failure means you're done shopping and have moved on to spending your newfound wealth on what you like best. (Remember that a roll of snake eyes is an automatic success.)

Regular equipment need not be purchased using MASTERY rolls. The following list can be used as a guideline for what sorts of items and commodities might require a MASTERY roll to obtain:

- Valuable heirlooms
- Works of art
- Real estate (houses, plots of land, towers, etc.)
- Jewelry
- Steeds, pets, or livestock
- Vehicles (carts, carriages, boats, etc.)
- Fine clothing
- Furniture (chests, tables, chairs, beds, etc.)
- High-quality equipment (see below)

MASTERY rolls can only be made when the characters are between jobs. While on the job, it's strictly business for thugs and thieves; there's no time for special shopping.

Example: Thedara has just arrived back in town, her pouches heavy with her share of the loot from the Lost Temple of Arganov. Thedara decides she wants to buy her own house instead of staying at the inn all the time. Michelle rolls the dice and gets a 5. Since Thedara's MASTERY is a 5, she gets her house! Michelle decides that Thedara also wants to hire someone to look after her house while she is away adventuring. Michelle makes another roll on MASTERY, this time at -2. But her luck (and Thedara's willpower) has apparently run out, because Michelle rolls a 9, not nearly low enough to succeed with Thedara's effective MASTERY of 3.

Once the characters have made a MASTERY roll or two and have purchased interesting and/or atypical possessions, these items are available to the characters as in-game resources. For example, Thedara's new house in the example above could serve as a hideout when the Arganov cultists come looking for the thugs and thieves who defiled their temple. The GM should maintain a list of the purchases the characters have made and encourage the players to incorporate all of their resources into the game.

On a related note, the GM is specifically forbidden to permanently take away items and possessions that characters have purchased with MASTERY rolls unless the player agrees to it and the character is duly compensated for the loss (usually with a different possession). That said, it can be fun for characters to lose their possessions and participate in adventures to re-obtain them. Like anything else, however, this sort of scenario can be overdone. GMs should use care.

High-Quality Equipment

High-quality equipment (one of the suggestions for purchased items above) is special gear that is of higher quality than the stuff normally carried by thugs and thieves. Weapons, armor, and other tools such as grappling hooks and lockpicks can be purchased in high-quality versions. When used, high quality equipment gives a +1 bonus to the task at hand. Only one high-quality item may be purchased with a single MASTERY roll.

The Role of Magic

Magic Spells and the Casters Thereof

The casting of spells in *Thugs & Thieves* is primarily window dressing. Magic is an integral part of the world, but most instances of spells, wizards, sorceresses, magical effects, etc. in the game should be largely for purposes of providing color to the setting and situation.

However, when the characters are facing off against a powerful magical opponent, it makes sense that the opponent would use magic to bring harm to the characters. In such cases, treat the magical power as an ABILITY and roll on it as with any ABILITY. Usually, the targeted character will have a chance to try and resist the effect of the spell. What ABILITY the character uses for this resistance will depend upon the magical effect; the GM will adjudicate.

Likewise, it is certainly within the realm of possibility that a character may wish to have a beneficial spell cast on his behalf. This could be anything from a spell to turn his hair green to a spell to bring a loved one back from the dead. Of course, wizards are odd folk (as everyone knows), and convincing one to cast a helpful spell can be very interesting indeed, assuming that one can even be found. If the GM allows it, certain magical services may be purchased in the same way as special equipment or items as described above. Alternatively, obtaining a service from a wizard can open up entire new avenues for adventuring.

GMs needn't sweat the precise details of magical spells; again, they're mostly for color anyway. Some basic guidelines for magic are listed below:

- Spells should be flamboyant, flashy, colorful, and just as cool as can be. The GM should attempt to make magic as magical as possible. Remember all those nifty runes that the wizard inscribed on Conan's corpse for the resurrection ritual? Or how the demon's fingernails got all glowy when he was about to summon forth a victim's steaming entrails in *The Sword and the Sorcerer*? That's the kind of cool that magic can and should be.

- Wizards and magical effects are not a dime a dozen. While it's true that thugs and thieves will encounter magic quite often, that's just a result of the line of work; it doesn't mean magic is commonplace or humdrum in the world at large.
- If the characters are looking to get a wizard to cast something significantly magical on their behalf, the GM should consider turning it into a quest or adventure. For example, perhaps the characters have to find a wizard who can do what they want; then perhaps they have to perform a task for the wizard as payment. You get the idea.

Magic Items

Magic items are rare and special in *Thugs & Thieves*. As a general guideline, the GM should make magic items available to the characters at a rate of only one or two items per adventure (not per session, not per character), and only then if the adventure involves a situation or location in which a magic item could reasonably be found or discovered. Ancient tombs, monster lairs, castle ruins, and the like are all places where magic items might be found. One place magic items will not be found is at a shop; magic items are far too rare and valuable to be a part of the normal economy.

Some care should be taken by the GM to ensure that magic items continue to be special. Throwing handfuls of powerful magic items into the game can make magic items seem mundane, which is just wrong. Where possible, make each magic item unique or cool in some way.

There are bazillions of possibilities for different types of magic items, and providing an exhaustive list of them is well outside the scope of this book. Some ideas to get a GM started are listed below:

- Magic Weapon: +2 (or more) to PHYSIQUE rolls when using the weapon. Any type of weapon can be enchanted.
- Magical Protective Item: +2 (or more) to TOUGHNESS rolls when hit in combat. The item could be a ring, amulet, animal pelt, shield, weapon, etc.
- Cloak of Invisibility: the wearer of this cloak cannot be seen by normal means.
- Gems of Communication: These large and colorful gemstones come in sets of two or more and can be used like walkie-talkies.
- Potions: Magical elixirs can have myriad effects, including temporary or permanent boosts to Abilities, invisibility, levitation, healing, etc.

Thugs and thieves know their treasure. Regardless of the details of a particular magic item, chances are at least one of the characters will have heard stories about such artifacts in their travels. To reflect this fact, a CUNNING roll is all that is necessary to determine whether or not a character knows an item is magical (although there shouldn't normally be any doubt) as well as how the item works and what it does.

Where appropriate, a newly obtained magic item should replace an existing possession; assume the old item is sold, traded away, or discarded. Thugs and thieves do not carry spares.

It is a good idea for the GM to try to tailor the magic items to the characters in the game. For example, *Conan the Barbarian* would have been a very different movie if Conan had found Bunny Slippers of Hopping in the ancient tomb instead of that bitchin' sword. The GM should pay attention to the sorts of characters the players are playing and use the DESCRIPTORS as guidelines for the sort of magic items the players might like their characters to have. Also, it is

important to keep the magic item distribution fairly equal among the characters. If a character got a magic item last adventure, it should be a different character's turn to get one.

Of course, it may come to pass that the GM comes up with a magic item that none of the players are interested in keeping. In that case, assume that the characters trade or sell the item off. Depending on the item, it might be fun to introduce it later on in the game, perhaps in the hands of an enemy!

As a final point, it should be noted that magic items are a form of reward for the characters (and players). As such, the GM may not take away magic items given to the characters unless the player agrees to it and is compensated in some way. This also means the so-called "cursed" magic items found in many fantasy games are not appropriate in *Thugs & Thieves*.

Procedures

Task Resolution

Task resolution in *Thugs & Thieves* is simple and straightforward. The player tells the GM what the character is doing, and the GM calls for a roll if random chance can contribute significantly to the character's success or failure. The GM will tell the player what ABILITY governs the task if it is not already obvious. The player rolls two six-sided dice, adds them together, and compares the result to the relevant ABILITY. If the roll is less than or equal to the ABILITY, the character succeeds at the task; otherwise, the character fails. The **Margin** of the task is determined by subtracting the roll from the ABILITY. Once the roll has been made and the MARGIN determined, the GM describes what happens to the character as a result of the task.

There is always some chance of success or failure in any task, regardless of ABILITY. A roll of snake eyes (2) always succeeds, and a roll of boxcars (12) always fails. In the case of an automatic success or failure, calculate the MARGIN as normal, except that if an ABILITY is less than 2 and a 2 is rolled, it is considered a success with a MARGIN of 0. Likewise, an Ability of 12 or more fails on a 12 with a MARGIN of 0.

Example: Thedara needs to climb a steep cliff. With her PHYSIQUE of 9, Michelle needs to roll a 9 or lower on two six-sided dice. If she were to roll a 6, for example, Thedara would make the climb successfully and without incident. If Michelle rolled a 10 or more, Thedara would fail in the task of climbing the cliff.

Success at a task usually means that things generally go in the character's favor. Failure can mean a number of different things. Using the example above, perhaps failure is simply due to the fact that the cliff is beyond Thedara's ability to climb, at least in the way she tried to climb it just now. She might try a different way up. Or perhaps she is halfway up the cliff when she slips and falls down, possibly taking injury. Bottom line is, the results of a task resolution roll are open to interpretation.

This interpretation is done by the players and GM. The player whose character is involved has final authority on what happens, but everyone is welcome to make suggestions. This should be an easy and painless process. The most important thing to remember is what the game is about: kick-butt, cool-ass fantasy action. As in character creation, the question "What would be cool?" is a good metric to keep in mind when determining the results of task resolution.

Opposed Rolls

If two or more entities are working directly against each other in a task, all entities roll. The entity with the highest MARGIN is the winner of the contest. If it's a tie, roll again until someone wins. Rerolls for ties can be instantaneous, taking no extra in-game time (such as when trying to see who grabs the amulet first), or they can represent repeated attempts at the task over time (such as an arm wrestling match). The GM makes the call on a case-by-case basis.

Example: Now Thedara is racing an enemy to the top of the cliff. Both entities would roll on their PHYSIQUE. The enemy's PHYSIQUE is 10. The GM rolls for the enemy, and gets a 7, for a MARGIN of 3. Michelle rolls for Thedara and also rolls a 7, but her MARGIN is only 2. The enemy reaches the top of the cliff before Thedara.

Modifiers

For purposes of clarification, any modifiers in task resolution are applied to the ABILITY, not the roll. Thus, a negative modifier is a penalty, while a positive modifier is a bonus.

As mentioned earlier, playing to the character's DESCRIPTORS earns a +1 bonus for the task.

Also, describing the character's action in a particularly interesting way earns a +1 at the GM's option. Remember that the goal here is over-the-top pulp fantasy action, and have fun with it.

Optional Rule: Difficulty Penalties

Sometimes, the players will try things that the GM thinks would be crazy hard. In such cases, the GM may assign penalties to the task. This is not a requirement; some GMs may choose to let the chips fall where they may. For GMs who choose to use penalties, the following guidelines are provided:

- -1 for a task that is a bit difficult, and/or that is taking place in slightly less than favorable conditions.
- -2 for a task that's pretty hard, and/or that is taking place in conditions that are downright unfavorable.
- -4 for a task that's way difficult, either for the task itself or because of conditions that really suck.
- If the GM assigns a penalty of -6 or more, there probably should be a good reason for it. A GM who imposes high penalties too often will have some pissed off players to deal with.

When to Roll

Obviously, you don't want to clutter up play with too many rolls. Characters do not need to roll to cross the street, comb their hair, draw their weapons, casually converse, eat and drink, or answer calls of nature. It is only necessary to turn to the dice when characters are genuinely challenged. Just what sorts of challenges call for rolls will depend on the people playing and particularly the GM. When the characters come upon a ten-foot chasm, some GMs may just let the characters cross without a roll, and others may require a roll to see if the characters can jump the gap successfully; it's a matter of taste. In general:

- The GM should require rolls when the characters are using PHYSIQUE to make attacks because MARGIN is a key factor in determining damage.
- The GM should require rolls whenever he deems that the characters are stretching the limits of their heroic abilities. Calling for a roll to leap a ten-foot chasm is a matter of GM taste; leaping a 30-foot chasm should probably require a roll no matter what.
- If a GM can't decide whether or not to require a roll, it helps to assess how the game is going. If the pace of play is quick and the players are excited, rolling under such circumstances can trip up the flow of the game. If, on the other hand, the players aren't as into the game and the pace is more leisurely, the GM may wish to go ahead and call for the roll. Rolling under these circumstances can ramp up the excitement and tension and get the players more interested. It's a judgement call, but a doubtful GM should rule in the interests of exciting play.

The Process of Combat

When an entity attacks another entity in the game, the attacker rolls on PHYSIQUE. If the attacker's PHYSIQUE roll is unsuccessful, the process stops; the attacker has missed his target. If the attacker's PHYSIQUE roll is successful, it is now up to the defender to determine if he is hit. If the defender has an opportunity to defend himself, he rolls on PHYSIQUE. If the defender's MARGIN is greater than or equal to the attacker's MARGIN, the defender successfully avoids the attack. If the defender is either unable to or chooses not to defend himself, the attack is successful, and the defender is potentially injured.

Getting Hurt, Getting Better

Physical damage is measured in abstract levels called **Wounds**. Whenever something happens that could cause your character to get physically hurt, make a **Wound Check**. This is simply a TOUGHNESS roll with a fancy name and special consequences for failure. If the WOUND CHECK is triggered by an attack, apply the attacker's MARGIN as a penalty. Failing a WOUND CHECK means the character has taken a WOUND. Taking WOUNDS affects a character as described below:

- One WOUND: The character is hurt, but not badly. No penalty.
- Two WOUNDS: The character is definitely hurt and starting to feel it. -2 to all rolls.
- Three WOUNDS: The character is severely wounded. -4 to all rolls.
- Four or more WOUNDS: The character is royally screwed. -8 to all rolls.

When a character sustains a fourth WOUND and on each subsequently sustained WOUND, he falls unconscious and cannot take any actions until some time passes or until he is revived by someone or something. At that point, he can take action but is at -8 (!) to all rolls. The intention here is that for all practical purposes, the character's activity will be limited to staggering around gingerly and maybe croaking out a few words between groans of pain. Players needn't bother keeping track of more than four WOUNDS; no matter how badly maimed the character is, in game terms there are only four levels of injury.

Sometimes damage does not cause a WOUND but instead has the potential to render a character unconscious. For this type of damage, a failed WOUND CHECK means that the character falls unconscious but does not take a WOUND. The character will come to after a while or may be revived by someone or something.

And, of course, there are injuries that cause normal WOUNDS as well as knockout. In that case, a failed WOUND CHECK means the character both takes a WOUND and is knocked unconscious.

Particularly severe circumstances can result in injuries that cause multiple WOUNDS in the event of a failed WOUND CHECK. Examples might include getting hit in the chest with a cannonball, falling off a cliff, or getting rolled up in a rug that is subsequently trampled by a rhinoceros. The GM determines whether an injury results in one or more WOUNDS. The GM should keep in mind that getting slashed with a sword, hit over the head with a club, or stabbed with a dagger all result in one WOUND under normal game circumstances; these examples can serve as a frame of reference when determining how many WOUNDS a particular circumstance might cause.

Healing

Characters heal one WOUND per week of in-game time. Magic can speed the healing process to any degree the GM desires.

Wounds and NPCs

It is usually a pain to track WOUNDS for every single adversary the characters encounter. Unless an adversary is particularly challenging or significant, the GM may wish to consider simply ruling him out of combat after one WOUND.

Character Death

A character can die only if the player agrees to it. This means no matter how bleak things look, the GM is not allowed to rule that a character has died without the player's permission. The most a GM can do is take the character straight to four WOUNDS, and this should only be done in extreme cases, like when a character leaps off a 200-foot cliff or something like that. This rule ensures that if a character is to die, the death will have thematic resonance and meaning that is satisfactory to the player's desires.

Conflict Resolution

Cool things happen in RPGs. That's usually the intention, anyway. Exactly what happens (and why it's cool) depends on the game and the people playing it. In general, *Thugs & Thieves* is designed to encourage rip-roaring pulp-fantasy action. Task resolution is the basic building block of determining, in game, what exactly happens as a result of an isolated expenditure of effort. Which is all well and good, but when you're dealing with intense situations, an "I roll, then you roll, then I roll again" system of doing things can have a detrimental effect on both the pace and the evocativeness of the game.

The conflict resolution system is used whenever multiple characters and/or NPCs get involved in a conflict of some sort. This conflict could be a combat, a legal debate, a chase through a crowded market, a scavenger hunt, or any situation that meets the following qualifications:

- One or more entities are acting in opposition to one or more other entities.
- The situation seems to call for more than a single task resolution roll in order to be resolved.

Phase 1 - Scripting

When such a situation is entered into, some discussion should take place. This discussion is the **Scripting** phase of the conflict. Each participant announces what he wants to accomplish in the immediate future; this includes all the NPCs' intentions, which are announced by the GM. Intentions may be revised at any time during SCRIPTING. Continue the discussion until everyone is happy with what their controlled entities are going to be doing. During the SCRIPTING process, if there is any doubt as to what ABILITY an entity is going to use, the GM will make a ruling. Any modifiers the GM assigns should also be fully disclosed during this phase.

Phase 2 - Execution

Once all intentions have been announced and everyone knows what ability their characters/NPCs are going to use, the **Execution** phase begins. This phase is where everything happens. To start off the EXECUTION phase, every participant who is doing something rolls two six-sided dice. Starting with the smallest number rolled and continuing in order from lowest to highest roll, the intentions (or failed intentions) are resolved and described. Any tasks are resolved using the same roll that determined the play order. The GM narrates the result of each roll in turn.

In case of ties, settle the order randomly. It is easiest for each tied participant to roll a six-sider and let the lowest go first.

Note that there is no way to guarantee the order in which the actions take place. All the planning and discussion in the SCRIPTING phase should take this point into account. If one entity's action is dependent on happening before or after another's, the potential is always there for the best laid plans to go horribly awry. That's a big part of how things get interesting.

Also note that different actions in the EXECUTION phase can take different amounts of time, and that's fine. The system is designed to create interesting action sequences rather than to manage in-game increments of time.

If an attacker succeeds at a PHYSIQUE roll against an opponent, the opponent has the option to defend against the attack as described in "The Process of Combat" above. If the defender has already taken his action earlier in the EXECUTION phase, he may defend against any number of attacks at no cost. However, if a defender has not yet acted, he must abort his stated action in order to defend. Aborting in this way allows the defender to defend against any number of future attacks during that EXECUTION phase. If the defender chooses not to defend, he simply takes his lumps. Rolling to defend against an attack is always a separate roll; do not use the roll made at the beginning of EXECUTION to defend.

Finally, a participant may simply elect to abort or change his action completely, but this comes at a cost: Each action that is aborted (except to defend) garners a cumulative -1 penalty on the character's next MASTERY roll. The reason being, switching gears quickly in a stressful conflict is, well, stressful. As a result, the character is less likely to exhibit a great deal of willpower when he gets paid.

Example: Let's say that Michelle, Paul, Herb, and Lucy are playing a game of Thugs & Thieves*. Lucy is the GM. Don't be put off by the semi-antagonistic banter below; they're all good friends, and joke around a lot.*

Michelle's character is Thedara (whom we've met), Paul's character is Durgan (a sniveling sneak), and Herb's character is Anwyll (a big burly Conan-type). The party has just rounded a corner in the villain's stronghold and met with a group of five guards. The guard in front,

apparently the leader, points at the characters and shouts, "Get them!" At this point, Lucy calls for a SCRIPTING phase.

Paul: *Well, Durgan is gonna plug one of them in the face with an arrow.*

Michelle: *Thedara brandishes her axe in a wide arc and charges.*

Herb: *What, no ululating battle cry, Xena?*

Michelle: *Very funny.*

Herb: *I'm going to throw my sword like a spear right through the leader's chest! Then I'll pull out my hand axes and go in swinging.*

Lucy: *One thing at a time, there, Anwyll.*

Paul: *Well, if you're going to go for the leader, I guess I'll shoot one of the other guys. Make it one that Thedara isn't charging.*

Michelle: *I was going to charge the leader. Can't you shoot your sword at someone else, Talon?*

Herb: *Very funny yourself. And if I'm throwing my sword, it's at the leader. Throwing a sword through someone's chest is better than charging them any day. But I won't do it if I have to do it to some random guy.*

Michelle: *Well, okay, but I get dibs on the next leader we come across.*

Herb: *It's a deal.*

Paul: *So, Lucy, these guys are actually going to do something other than stand there, right?*

Lucy: *Oh, don't worry. All four of the lackeys are going to throw their spears and then draw their short swords. Let's see... Thedara, since you're charging, you'll be taking two spears, and one each for Durgan and Anwyll.*

Michelle: *Okay, well, I'll go for one of the ones throwing at me. By the way, how far away are these guys, anyway? I'm going to be able to charge and attack, right?*

Lucy: *Sure. Let's say they're twenty feet away.*

Herb: *What about the leader? What's he doing?*

Lucy: *I was coming to that. The leader is falling back behind his men as they step forward to throw their spears. Unlike the others, he carries a two-handed sword and is obviously an experienced warrior.*

Everybody set? (All nod) Alright, it's EXECUTION *time. Drop some dice. (While the players roll, Lucy rolls five times and marks down the numbers for each of the guards.) Okay, who's got the lowest?*

Herb: *Anybody beat a 4?*

Michelle: *Damn, good job.*

Lucy: *Actually, one of the guards got a 4 as well. (Lucy and Herb each roll a single die; Lucy wins the throw.) It's one of the guys throwing a spear at you, Thedara. Are you going to defend, or try to tough it out?*

Michelle: *Hmm. Well, I rolled crappy anyway, so I guess I'll abort to defend. (Rolls 9.) Made it exactly. What's the* MARGIN *I'm dealing with?*

Lucy: *His* MARGIN *is 2, so he hits you. Roll* TOUGHNESS *at -2.*

Michelle: *(Rolls 8.) Damn. Missed by 2. (Marks the wound on her character sheet.)*

Lucy: *Okay, Anwyll, it's your turn.*

Herb: *Hell yeah! Leader dude's taking a sword in the chest.* MARGIN *5, baby!*

Lucy: *Ouch. Well, he'll abort to defend, obviously. Here goes nothing. (Rolls 10.) Yikes. Okay,* TOUGHNESS *at -5 it is. (Rolls 3.) Sweet! He makes it! He now has a look of genuine surprise and shock on his face, and your sword is imbedded in his heavy leather coat. The blade passed under his arm, missing flesh by millimeters.*

Herb: *Crap. Well, my axes are out now, anyway. Next round, he's mine.*

Lucy: *Promises, promises. Okay, who's next?*

Paul: *I got a 5.*

Lucy: *Go for it.*

Paul: *Well, I was shooting one of the guards that Thedara wasn't attacking. My* MARGIN *on* PHYSIQUE *is 2.*

Lucy: *Let's say you're going for the one who's attacking you, since I already have your initials by his name.*

Paul: *He has a name?*

Lucy: Yeah, his name's "Guard 3," and he's aborting to defend. (Rolls 7.) Nope, he's hit. Let's see if you hurt him. TOUGHNESS at -2. (Rolls 6.) And he's hurt. He takes an arrow in the chest and drops like a ton of bricks.

Paul: Hey, I said I was shooting for the face!

Lucy: Sadistic bastard...

Paul: Damn straight.

Lucy: Okay, so he takes an arrow through the head, and falls to his knees screaming. Then, he collapses face down and doesn't move.

Paul: Booya!

Lucy: Okay. Everyone else has aborted, including the leader. That leaves the other three guards, who all rolled lousy. Spears clatter harmlessly about the walls, adding to the confusion and mayhem. Then they pull out their short swords, faces grim. I think it's safe to say that it's on. Let's do another SCRIPTING phase.

Some conflicts can be resolved in a single iteration of SCRIPTING and EXECUTION. Others may take several iterations. If, after a single iteration, the two conditions described above continue to be met by the in-game situation, the conflict resolution continues with further iterations until the conflict is resolved.

Character Development

At the end of each session, each player chooses an ABILITY that the character used (i.e. rolled against) during the session and increases that ABILITY by one. An ABILITY may not go above 12. MASTERY may not be modified in this way, but if the character's lowest ABILITY goes up, MASTERY goes up along with it.

Also at the end of each session, if the player wishes, one DESCRIPTOR of any ABILITY may be modified, either to refine it or completely change it. The player must provide the GM with an acceptable in-game reason to change the DESCRIPTOR, but it doesn't have to be too robust a reason. The experiences of thugs and thieves are extreme, and life-altering events can happen every day.

Optional Rule: Chronicles

For the authorial GM, creating a **Chronicle** for the game can be an extremely rewarding experience. At the end of each session, players must take a few minutes to write a sentence or two summarizing the session and what part their characters played in it. These should be from an in-game perspective, although not necessarily from the character's point of view. The GM then collects these paragraphs and compiles them into a single narrative, adding whatever details he deems appropriate. After the campaign has concluded, the GM can provide each player with a copy of the completed CHRONICLE. Creating a CHRONICLE is a wonderful way to provide the group with a lasting souvenir of the game.

How to Play

Intercharacter Relations: The Party

I assume you've heard of "honor even among thieves." What that phrase refers to is the fact that even lowly criminals have a code of honor that governs their actions to a certain degree in relation to one another. Specifically, the main rule is, you don't double-cross your mates. (Or, if you do, you're not mates anymore.)

The characters in *Thugs & Thieves* run together in what we refer to as, in the antiquated traditions of fantasy role-playing, a party. Characters in a party work together, split the take evenly, watch each other's backs, and generally function as a single unit. In this game, patrons do not hire individuals; they hire parties.

For most of my gaming career, there has been a running joke about casting a "Detect PC" spell in order to determine how to behave with a person the other characters have only just met. Integrating new characters into the existing group was often problematic, in that it was viewed as unrealistic to make adventuring companions of what were, at best, total strangers. However, in *Thugs & Thieves* this sort of scenario is not at all out of place in terms of the game.

I call attention once more to those 80's movies. Think, for example, of the time Conan met the little thief dude outside the witch's hut. One scene, approximately thirty seconds of dialog, and the next scene shows the two traveling together. They remain steadfast and true companions for the remainder of the film, each putting himself at risk for the other on many occasions.

The only time it is appropriate for a character to turn against other characters is when that character is leaving the party for some reason. This reason might be that the player doesn't like the character and wishes to play someone else, or must leave the role-playing group. Even then, it isn't strictly necessary to turn the characters against one another in order to sever party ties. Friends come and friends go in life, and thugs and thieves know this. In any case, it should be fairly easy and painless for characters to come and go.

What the Characters Do

Now that everyone has an idea of how the rules work and what the characters are like, it's time to talk about what the characters do. What happens during a session? Well, basically, the GM is largely responsible for presenting options to the players, and the players are responsible for acting upon these options. However, that's a pretty open-ended description.

Most of the time, play sessions will involve full-on, no-holds-barred action and adventure. Characters will engage in conflicts and situations involving monsters, magic, combat, and intrigue, and they will do so for money in the service of wealthy patrons. When they're not working, the characters are playing, which involves indulging their VICES and making MASTERY rolls for special purchases. For short-term jobs, the characters will get paid (and have the opportunity to make MASTERY rolls) upon completion of the assignment. For long-term jobs, assume that the characters get periodic "vacations" during which they may take some time off for both partying and shopping. As a general guideline, players can expect their characters to get paid once every few sessions.

The Mood

The primary focus of *Thugs & Thieves* is to support light-hearted adventure, and most of the text reflects this intent. However, the game can also be used for grim, dark fantasy or anything in

between. It's all a matter of how the VICE is incorporated as a part of play. Are the characters quelling their personal demons in their hedonistic indulgences? In that case, special purchases represent the characters' will to better their station in life in the face of their own shortcomings. By default, of course, the characters are partying hardy in between bouts of rip-roaring ass-kicking, and the special purchases represent the occasional setting aside of personal indulgence in the interests of buying cool shit. It's up to the individual group to decide which of these options is more worthy of exploration.

Obviously, the mood of the game is something that needs to be decided before play begins, and preferably prior to character creation. It is always a good idea for a group to have some idea of what sort of play experience they want before starting; this is true of any game, and *Thugs & Thieves* is no exception

What About the Setting?

As far as setting is concerned, GMs, you're on your own. Setting isn't a keystone of this game; the setting is implied by the rules themselves. The specific details of the lands your characters live in and explore are entirely up to you. Do you want a big sprawling desert city? Poof! There it is. An ancient, sprawling forest filled with dire beasts and carnivorous plants? Poof! There it is. A giant cave complex with a floor plan shaped like a human skeleton? Poof! A ruined temple to forgotten gods haunted by ghosts and plagued by fell beasts? Poof! All of this poofing is to emphasize the primary setting guidelines for *Thugs & Thieves*: Don't worry too much about details. This isn't a game about history, rich political landscapes, delicately balanced fictional ecologies, trade routes, or how many families inhabit this or that town. If you have a general idea of how things work and what things look like, that general idea will be enough for you to keep things consistent enough to support a campaign. Remember that the best *Thugs & Thieves* settings are all about flavor, attitude, and style. The setting needs to feel seedy, seamy, primal, and vice-ridden.

But that's easy for me to say; I'm pretty good at running games by the seat of my pants. If you're having trouble creating your own setting, either your game needs more action, or you need more setting guidelines than this humble tome can provide. There are dozens and dozens of cool fantasy settings out there; many of them are free. Go find one you like, and good luck!

As a corollary to the points above, don't be stingy with information. Don't force the players to map out your dungeons and strongholds in order to get in and out of them. Don't make them roll on CUNNING to remember the bartender's name if they didn't write it down. And, should the players stretch their legs a bit and start defining pieces of the setting themselves through role-playing, encourage that. It will make your job as GM a hell of a lot easier, and it will get your players more interested in playing the game.

Environments

Instead of concentrating on setting at large, a GM should consider the specific features of the in-game "sets" and make these features a part of play. Whether the set is a small area (like a room or small building), a larger area (such as a town, lake, or castle), or even a large geographical region (such as a forest, desert, or mountain range), the GM should pay careful attention to how the environment can interact with the characters, and vice versa.

Example: Suppose the characters are in a nobleman's study. Perhaps the table could be tipped over and used as a makeshift shield, or even picked up and thrown at a monster. A

candelabra is a ready source of mayhem, either if used specifically for arson or inadvertently knocked over into the long heavy curtains.

Suppose the characters are in a library. If they are being pursued, knocking a standing bookshelf over would be a good way to delay the pursuers. All the better if knocking over one shelf creates a domino effect and brings the entire library crashing down a shelf at a time.

Or suppose the characters are in the mountains and come across a rope bridge. Is the rope bridge safe? Should the characters cross one at a time? Perhaps the bridge is rickety, and even if the characters cross one at a time there is a chance the bridge gives way while someone is crossing.

On a larger scale, the lands themselves can play a huge role in both the events and the overall flavor of the game. A session that takes place in a forest teeming with all sorts of weird and dangerous denizens will be very different from a session that takes place in a vast, sandy desert. Or one that takes place in the high mountain passes. Or in the icy tundra, or the verdant meadowlands, or the ocean shore, or on a sailing vessel far from land. There is no real reason why a game can't range across any and all of these different types of landscapes, and the scenery can be as important an NPC as any.

When creating and playing in the sets and locales, it is important that everyone remember that, above all, the environments need to be gritty and vice-ridden. What does that mean? Well, the vice-ridden part is easy. Simply put, unless the characters are thousands of miles away from the nearest human settlements, there are *always* places where a variety of vices can be indulged. Regardless of whether or not the characters are in a position to indulge their own VICES, there are people around who are more than willing to take up the slack. Gritty is a little harder to nail down in plain English. Basically, the settings in *Thugs & Thieves* are not clean, smooth, or polished in any way. Cities are ancient and buildings are more often than not in poor repair. Common folk are dirty, downtrodden, suspicious, dishonest, and as decadent as their means will allow. The wilderness is dangerous, and only fools wander the wilds alone or unarmed.

Maps and Such

Nearly as important as the environment itself is how the different areas and locations in the game link up to one another. In other words, the GM should have a general idea how characters get from point A to point B. That isn't to say that it is necessary to have detailed maps and such. Usually it is sufficient to know the general layout of setting elements.

Example: To get from the castle to the forest, you have to cross the river. To cross the river, you have to use the fords, but if it has rained recently and the water level is up there's a chance to lose your footing and get swept over the falls. The forest is at the base of the mountains, and the mountain passes are frequently guarded by bandits and/or trolls; rock falls are also a common hazard. Below the falls and downriver, there is a large lake infested by plesiosaur-like monsters. And so on.

A quick and dirty way to "map" out a series of locations is by drawing blobs and lines on a sheet of paper. Each blob represents a location, and the lines connecting the blobs indicate possible paths between the different locations. These diagrams can be an invaluable tool for a GM when the characters move from set to set.

Of course, if you're a fan of maps (and what fantasy gamer isn't?), incorporating them into play can certainly add flavor and punch to the game. Just take care that a map is not the focus of the adventure; keep maps strictly in the role of providing color. Perhaps most importantly, make sure there isn't a "GMs Only" map. That sort of secrecy and "behind-the-screen" tactic isn't appropriate for *Thugs & Thieves*.

Adversaries and NPCs

Average Joe/Jane

Your average everyday citizen's ABILITIES might go something like this: BEAST LORE 5, CHARISMA 5, CUNNING 5, PHYSIQUE 3, THIEVERY 3, TOUGHNESS 3.

The GM may adjust the above numbers to taste, but keep in mind that an average everyday citizen should be no match for a thug or thief. The characters are called heroes for a reason.

One might wonder how an entity with such low numbers could accomplish anything with any regularity. Remember that the ABILITIES used in *Thugs & Thieves* are very specific to thuggery and thievery. The average citizen might be an accomplished craftsman or merchant, but he's not going to be able to deal with beasts, booby traps, and armed opponents anywhere near as effectively as a character.

People Who Get in the Way

Your average evil stronghold guard will look pretty much like an average citizen as listed above, except they'll tend to have higher PHYSIQUE and TOUGHNESS; 4-6 would be appropriate for these ABILITIES. Some of these types may have better THIEVERY as well; it depends on the particular NPC.

Worthy Adversaries

The ABILITIES of powerful, noteworthy villains are generated using the same method used for characters. As such, these worthy adversaries can be as varied in their ABILITIES as the characters, and will be comparable in terms of power and effectiveness. To make a more powerful villain, add a few points to the ABILITIES.

For a spell-casting NPC, add an appropriate spell-casting ABILITY. This is only necessary if you suspect that the NPC will use magic against the PCs, in which case it is used for opposed rolls in task and/or conflict resolution.

Beasts

Monsters and fell creatures should play some part in every session of *Thugs & Thieves*. In terms of the game, a beast is an obviously non-human entity that presents two opportunities to the characters:

1. The beast can be rendered non-threatening either through combat, a trap, appeasement, or some other type of conflict.
2. The characters can make BEAST LORE rolls to gain insight into the beast, including strengths and weaknesses, habits and disposition, and supernatural properties.

"Standard" monsters and fell creatures look pretty much like your average guard as far as ABILITIES are concerned. Big nasty monsters, such as giant snakes, should be treated like worthy

adversaries when it comes to ABILITIES, unless we're talking about a particularly tough cookie. In that case, the GM may make the monster as tough and scary as desired. It's always good to make the characters (and the players) sweat a little. And before balking at increasing a beast's ABILITIES to 12 and above, the GM should remember that a roll of boxcars is a failure regardless of ABILITY. There is never a sure thing in this game.

Finally, under no circumstances may a beast be uninteresting. Every beast in the game without exception must have at least one interesting tidbit of information that can be provided to the players on a successful BEAST LORE roll. This information could be as simple or complex as the GM desires. Perhaps the beast has a weakness for a certain food. Perhaps it is soothed by music. Perhaps its saliva (or blood, or breath, or whatever) is venomous. Perhaps it is only dangerous during mating season. Perhaps it catches fire when under direct moonlight. Perhaps it will come back to life a few moments after it's "killed" unless its head is removed.

NPCs

Non-adversarial NPCs are an important part of any *Thugs & Thieves* game. First of all, they'll be hiring the party to do jobs. These NPCs can be from all walks of life, and the job pitch itself can progress in any manner the GM can imagine.

Another type of NPC with which the characters interact is the personal contact. While not necessarily friends, these NPCs know the characters (and their VICES), may have worked with the characters in the past, and are willing to exploit the characters' greed. These NPCs can act as informants, guides, or may simply be "friends" who always seem to be around whenever the characters have money to spend. In any case, the GM may work freely with the players in creating these NPCs either before or during play. Furthermore, either the GM or the players may work them into the game when desired. Of course, the players will not themselves be playing the NPCs, but may have their characters initiate contact with one or more of them. If it is reasonable to assume an NPC is available, the GM should have no compunctions about introducing them into the session.

The Campaign

As the characters develop and become more powerful and experienced, things change.

Notably, as the characters' ABILITIES increase, so do their MASTERY levels. As a result, it becomes easier for the characters to make purchases and not squander their money on their VICES all the time. As the characters grow older and witness and experience more and more, their outlook on life gradually changes. The gradual increase of the MASTERY level is a reflection of this process, which in real life is called maturation.

At some point, it might make sense for a character to retire. Perhaps that brush with death on the last job was a real eye-opener for the character, or perhaps the character has fallen in love and has decided to settle down. This is a natural process in *Thugs & Thieves*, and a character may retire at any time the player feels it to be thematically appropriate.

Of course, some characters may never achieve this level of maturity. That's not a bad thing. Such characters simply go on indefinitely until old age and/or hard living take their toll (which will happen only when the player desires it).

Optional Rule: Mandatory Retirement

Some GMs may wish to require that any character retire when the character's MASTERY has reached a certain level, such as 8 or 9. This gives players a definite goal and ending point for their character that can be pursued at any rate desired.

How Long Is This Going To Take?

It should be fairly obvious at this point that this is not a be-all, end-all role-playing game. *Thugs & Thieves* is not designed to be the game that your group will play forever and ever, amen. Rather, it is designed to support a relatively short, action-packed, exciting campaign. But how many adventures? And for how many sessions? The easiest answer is, as many as the group is willing to play. But really, that's not a terribly practical answer. The game is intended to support multiple adventures with the same characters, who are expected to develop over a relatively short time until they are masters of their trade and become, through purchases, masters of their own fates as well. In a *Thugs & Thieves* game, it is best to keep the ending in sight.

Depending on how the group likes to play, the campaign can be a series of challenging jobs, one after another, without any real connected plotline. Alternatively, the GM may have a scripted campaign in mind that carries the characters through a series of escalating adventures leading to an epic conclusion. Both these methods, and anything in between, are perfectly doable.

Of course, if you're not interested in doing a full campaign but are simply looking for a quick diversion, *Thugs & Thieves* works just fine for one-shot adventures as well.

Acknowledgements

If you're only interested in reading game rules, stop here; there are no game rules beyond this point. If, on the other hand, you like this game and want to know more about its influences and how it came to be, read on.

Games

Games that have directly influenced this game in some fashion are listed below in alphabetical order:

- *Donjon* (www.anvilwerks.com/docs/donjon)
- *Fudge* (www.fudgerpg.com/fudge/)
- *octaNe* (www.memento-mori.com/octane/)
- *Sorcerer* (www.sorcerer-rpg.com)
- *Trollbabe* (www.adept-press.com/trollbabe/)
- *Tunnels & Trolls* (www.flyingbuffalo.com/tandt.htm)
- XPG System (Deep7's house system [www.deep7.com])

And, of course, the venerable *Dungeons & Dragons* (all editions; current edition website at www.wizards.com/dnd/) deserves some mention as the game that started it all.

Movies

The following films all provided inspiration for the game and can provide players with fodder and ideas that can be used to help create their own unique *Thugs & Thieves* experience:

- *The Beastmaster*
- *Conan the Barbarian*
- *Dragonheart*
- *Ladyhawk*
- *The Mummy* (1999)
- *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl*
- *The Princess Bride*
- *The Sword and the Sorcerer*
- *The Wizard of Oz*

People

The development of this game has been aided by these folks (and others) from The Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com), a hotbed of radical RPG design:

David Chunn, Ron Edwards, Walt Freitag, Mike Holmes, Thomas Tamblyn, Jay Turner, Rich Stokes, Brand Robbins

Thanks!

Playtesters

Troy Gustavel, Tony Limbert, Michael Marquis, Rich Stokes

Thanks!