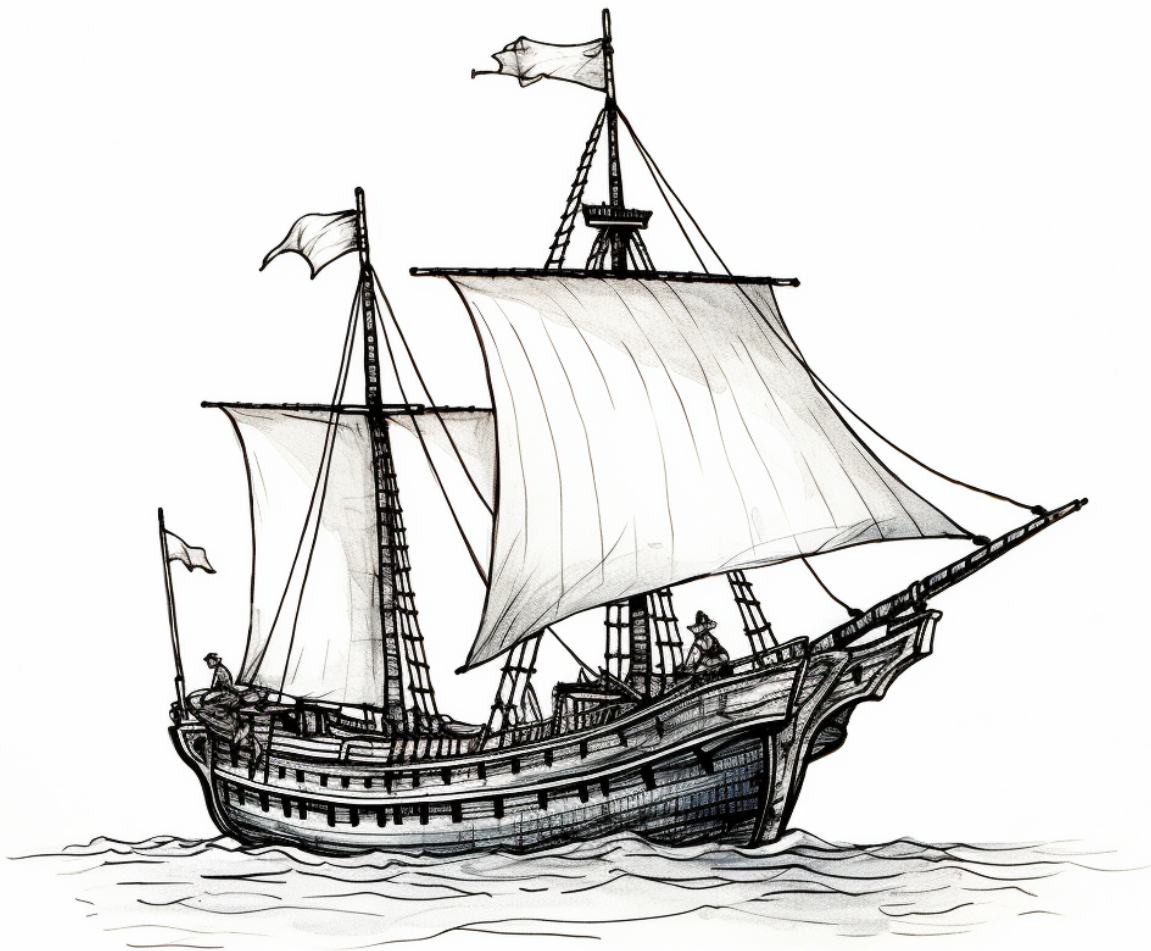


Ship of Theseus

The revolving door of death roleplaying game

By Jason Pollak



Overview

Ship of Theseus is a role-playing game about how haphazard communities are affected by loss, whether by death or betrayal. But it is not about grief. It is about pursuing a goal and having one's heart beat in time with the rhythm of a group, even as the members of that group are constantly in flux.

In this game, you will create many characters to embody as you and your friends follow the exploits of a constantly-changing group, following a common goal. Though you may not be playing the same character at the end that you began, each character leaves their mark on the identity of the group, and moves the collective one step closer to achieving their goal.

Death and betrayal are huge moments in any story. In this game, they happen so frequently that players need to be able to create complex characters quickly to keep up with the action. This game uses a simple character-creation system based on collecting cards that describe their personality and abilities.

This game is played with a game master, and 3-6 player characters. If you'd like to play with more than 6, you'll need another set of cards!



Character Creation

At your first session, start by shuffling all the trait cards and passing out 5 cards to each player. Players will “draft” these cards, taking turns picking an aspect of their character and passing the rest of their hand to the next player, until they have 4 cards. Keep the rest of the cards on hand.

Once every player has a character, formed out of 4 trait cards, they should create a name and story for who their character is. They should assign their character a talent (something that makes them special) and a vice (their fatal flaw.)

For example, if I have a character with the traits “Outgoing,” “Lively,” “Thoughtful,” and “Moody,” I know my character is going to be social and pleasant, but have a dark side that sends them into a moody spiral from time to time. I decide my character will be the life of the party, who quickly turns from a loving drunk to a passive-aggressive party pooper somewhere between their third and fourth drink. Their vice is alcohol, they’re specifically tempted by drink because they love how they become the subject of everyone’s adoration after they’ve knocked a few back. My character is specially gifted in making friends and navigating social situations, so I’ll make their talent “making others laugh.”



Skills

In addition to the trait from their cards, your character will also get bonuses to different skills. With 4 traits, each character will have 12 total bonus points to their skills.

*For example, my character with
Outgoing (+2 Experience, +1 Perception),
Lively, (+1 Agility, +1 Combat, +1 Manipulation)
Thoughtful, (+2 Experience, +1 Knowledge)
and Moody (+1 Combat, +1 Perception, +1 Stealth)
will have a total of +4 Experience, +2 Perception, +2 Combat, +1 Agility, +1
Manipulation, +1 Knowledge, +1 Stealth, and 0 in every other skill.*

Whenever a character performs an action where the outcome is in doubt, they'll test their abilities with one of these skills. The Game Master may ask for a check with a certain skill, but will also ask the player what skill they're using to achieve their goal. If the player wishes to use a certain skill to achieve a task, they are free to do so, as long as it's narratively justified.

For example, if I want to leap between rooftops, I want to test my Agility stat. No amount of skill with manipulation will help me cross this gap, unless I can convince someone to be my human drawbridge. However, I might be able to use experience to cross this gap by suggesting that my character has ran on rooftops before and looks for an easily traversable path.

The skills in this game each start with a different letter, to help with shorthand. They are:

Agility: Movement speed and reflexes.

Brawn: Brute strength.

Combat: Fighting others.

Fortitude: Resistance to sleep, intoxicants, and other ailments.

Stealth: Avoiding detection.

Tough: Resistance to physical damage.

Experience: Street smarts and special skills.

Instinct: Split-second reactions and gut feelings.

Knowledge: Book learnin'.

Manipulation: Controlling, convincing, or influencing others.

Perception: Intuition and observation.

Willpower: Resistance to trauma, manipulation, and stress.

Skill Tests

When a skill has been decided for the test, that player will roll d6 equal to their skill value, plus any other modifiers. The game master will set a difficulty obstacle:

- 1 is easy tasks that aren't routine. Anything routine does not need to be a check.
- 2 is moderately difficult.
- 3 is not for the faint of heart.
- 4 is a tough challenge.
- 5 is a daunting task.
- 6 is a herculean effort.
- 7 is impossible odds.
- 8 and above is a miracle.

5 or a 6 on a d6 is a success! A character must meet or exceed the obstacle in successes to achieve their goal.

If I have a character without any trait points in a skill, I have no dice to roll! But, a character without points in a skill can still pass a check, with help. This help can come in the form of:

- Gear & Conditions
- Talent, Vices, & Traits
- Exertion
- Allies

Gear & Conditions

Gear is something the character has and keeps with them, such as a suit or a knife. These give bonus dice to skills based on GM discretion.

- Moderately helpful (A suit for manipulation, a leather glove for combat) +1
- Quite helpful (A map for experience, a picture of a loved one for willpower) +2
- Extremely helpful (A knife for combat, an iPhone for knowledge) +3

After using gear, roll a die. If it's a 1, that gear is lost or out of commission in some way. (Using your last bullet, phone running out of battery, bird poop on the suit)

Conditions, similarly, affect your handful of dice. Conditions are temporary states that can add or subtract from skills, which the character is relieved of when narratively justified. They might have the "tipsy" condition, which lowers their Fortitude and Perception but

increases their Manipulation, or the “broken leg” condition which severely decreases their agility.

Game masters, don't forget to give characters gear and conditions as a result of their actions!

Talent, Vices & Traits

If a character is using their talent to solve a problem, they can add +2 to the roll. If a character is behaving in accordance with their traits, they can add +1 to the roll. If a character is directly pursuing their vice, add +2 to the roll.

Paradoxical characters

If a character has 2 opposing traits (indicated on their cards) that character is paradoxical.

Paradoxical characters can't use either trait for a +1 to a roll. However, these characters' paradoxical nature allows them to exert themselves twice as often (4 times a day instead of 2.)

Exertion

Once per day, each character may exert themselves physically and once mentally. They may choose to exert themselves before or after rolling the other dice for a check. Exertion grants +2 to a roll using either a physical or mental skill.

Allies

Allies are the best way to gain lots of dice to a roll. Each ally is marked on the character record, and their help bonus is listed. Whenever 2 characters work together, they add the leftmost value, then mark off that circle. This means that characters helping each other actually starts out as a disadvantage, but the more they work together, the better the advantage will be!

Death and Betrayal

In this game, betraying the party or finding an untimely end can be a strategic move, both narratively and mechanically! At any point in the story, you may choose to sacrifice your character. If you do, for the rest of the scene, all the other players succeed on 3-6 instead of 5-6.

However a character leaves the party, they must do so because of their vice. The game master should tempt the characters with their vices in play, pushing them closer and closer to giving up the mission.

When a character dies or betrays the party, they lose all progress with their allies, and the player must create a new character from the unused trait cards. At this point, they may pick any 4 unused traits they like, outside of the ones from their past character.

Whatever the rest of the characters are doing, they and the game master must work together to recruit this new character to the cause as soon as possible. The new character's player can help with this by choosing a talent that the party would be looking for. In a longer session, one particularly trigger-happy player could go through 3 or more characters!



Advice for game masters

This game can be played in any setting, though it leans toward modern, realistic(ish) stories of criminals and other ne'er do wells executing great heists or fighting great injustice on their own terms. Or both. The only necessity is that the story must be full of temptation and danger. Characters should be constantly one wrong step away from oblivion, so the world needs to justify that.

It's generally recommended to group sessions into short arcs, likely 4-10 sessions. Each arc should have a stated goal, and each session should be about taking a concrete step towards that goal (with a smaller stated goal.) By following the group as it pursues a goal over multiple sessions, your group will begin to see how much has been sacrificed in the pursuit of that goal. The party's goal, therefore, often works best as some sort of heroic social change, though devilish schemes work just as well.

Being stuck in situations of danger and pulled towards one's vices is a precarious position to be in. As such, characters generally work best when they occupy a precarious social position as well. A character with too many resources, too much privilege, or who is too notorious or famous, will be in some scenarios resistant to demise, either of their body or their reputation, leading them to clash with the game's sacrificial nature.

Characters in this game, by nature, have simple backstories and fall into tropes. In order to increase depth and keep the story feeling coherent, players are highly encouraged to create new characters that are related to existing party members, or even to play NPCs that the party has encountered in the past.

Your demolitions expert character died in a horrific explosion, but the party still needs something blown up? Enter his sister, with a very different personality, but a similar knack for making things go boom.

Players are also encouraged to explore a wide variety of characters. Don't like the story you've been telling? Help out the party and try someone else's perspective on! Always wanted to put yourself in the shoes of someone very different from you, but didn't want to commit to it for too long? Characters can die at any moment!

<p>Quiet</p> <p>+1 Agility +1 Knowledge +1 Stealth</p> <p>Opposite: Talkative</p>	<p>Unsociable</p> <p>+2 Knowledge +1 Stealth</p> <p>Opposite: Sociable</p>	<p>Reserved</p> <p>+1 Fortitude +1 Stealth +1 Tough</p> <p>Opposite: Outgoing</p>	<p>Pessimistic</p> <p>+1 Combat +1 Experience +1 Knowledge</p> <p>Opposite: Optimistic</p>
<p>Talkative</p> <p>+1 Knowledge +2 Manipulation</p> <p>Opposite: Quiet</p>	<p>Sociable</p> <p>+1 Experience +2 Manipulation</p> <p>Opposite: Unsociable</p>	<p>Outgoing</p> <p>+2 Experience +1 Perception</p> <p>Opposite: Reserved</p>	<p>Optimistic</p> <p>+1 Manipulation +1 Perception +1 Willpower</p> <p>Opposite: Pessimistic</p>
<p>Restless</p> <p>+2 Agility +1 Instinct</p> <p>Opposite: Reliable</p>	<p>Reliable</p> <p>+2 Brawn +1 Tough</p> <p>Opposite: Restless</p>	<p>Aggressive</p> <p>+2 Combat +1 Tough</p> <p>Opposite: Peaceful</p>	<p>Excitable</p> <p>+1 Agility +1 Brawn +1 Instinct</p> <p>Opposite: Even-Tempered</p>
<p>Passive</p> <p>+1 Knowledge +1 Stealth +1 Willpower</p> <p>Opposite: Active</p>	<p>Careful</p> <p>+1 Knowledge +2 Stealth</p> <p>Opposite: Responsive</p>	<p>Thoughtful</p> <p>+2 Experience +1 Knowledge</p> <p>Opposite: Touchy</p>	<p>Active</p> <p>+1 Agility +2 Brawn</p> <p>Opposite: Passive</p>

<p>Sober</p> <p>+1 Brawn +1 Fortitude +1 Tough</p> <p>Opposite: Impulsive</p>	<p>Rigid</p> <p>+1 Fortitude +2 Tough</p> <p>Opposite: Easygoing</p>	<p>Anxious</p> <p>+1 Combat +2 Perception</p> <p>Opposite: Carefree</p>	<p>Moody</p> <p>+1 Combat +1 Perception +1 Stealth</p> <p>Opposite: Leadership</p>
<p>Impulsive</p> <p>+1 Agility +2 Instinct</p> <p>Opposite: Sober</p>	<p>Easygoing</p> <p>+1 Manipulation +2 Willpower</p> <p>Opposite: Rigid</p>	<p>Carefree</p> <p>+1 Fortitude +2 Willpower</p> <p>Opposite: Anxious</p>	<p>Leadership</p> <p>+1 Experience +1 Manipulation +1 Willpower</p> <p>Opposite: Moody</p>
<p>Even-Tempered</p> <p>+2 Fortitude +1 Fortitude</p> <p>Opposite: Excitable</p>	<p>Changeable</p> <p>+1 Instinct +2 Perception</p> <p>Opposite: Controlled</p>	<p>Controlled</p> <p>+2 Brawn +1 Stealth</p> <p>Opposite: Changeable</p>	<p>Peaceful</p> <p>+1 Fortitude +1 Perception +1 Tough</p> <p>Opposite: Aggressive</p>
<p>Responsive</p> <p>+3 Instinct</p> <p>Opposite: Careful</p>	<p>Touchy</p> <p>+1 Agility +2 Combat</p> <p>Opposite: Thoughtful</p>	<p>Lively</p> <p>+1 Agility +1 Combat +1 Manipulation</p> <p>Opposite: Calm</p>	<p>Calm</p> <p>+1 Experience +1 Fortitude +1 Willpower</p> <p>Opposite: Lively</p>