

Pirates of Dark Water

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Mer

Mer is an oceanic world with a sky spotted with low-hanging planets, and islands scattered with ruins and ancient civilizations.

Most sentient life on Mer are human, or are predominantly human, but almost half of the populations of many major cities have strange ancestries. Unusual body shapes and features abound. In addition, there are distinct cultures across Mer that do not live intermingled with humanity at all.

Warm, lush and colorful, Mer is teeming with bizarre, alien life, but also plagued by Dark Water, a slick black fluid that courses through the seas, and responds to the whims of the Dark Dweller, a mysterious and sinister aquatic lord.

While Dark Water is a sinister force that threatens Mer, it is also driven by its own unknowable intelligence. It is not mindlessly or monolithically destructive, and it may hinder and destroy vile forces as readily as just ones. Dark Water is, above all else, inscrutable.

Principles

In the vibrant and unforgiving world of Mer, it's hard to survive without strong principles to drive you. Training and luck count for a lot, but it is heart that carries one safely across the seas.

A character's beliefs are the primary method for determining success and failure for action that truly test one's limits, or can be called upon when a character attempts something without training. The stronger a principle, the more likely a character is to succeed in upholding it. But for a principle to be meaningful, it must be upheld in one's actions even when inconvenient. Failing to adhere to one's principles weakens them, sometimes dramatically.

Begin with at least one principle rated at 5 or 6 and at least two at 1 to 3. Within these parameters, you may assign principle as you see fit. There are upsides and there are downsides to all principles, and their values will change in play, even giving way to their dark counterparts, listed here in parentheses.

Dark principles are used like normal principles, but function differently when risking it all or when resisting their influence (see below).

It is important to note that principles don't make one "good" and dark principles don't make one "evil" Niddler is good, but paranoid. Bloth is evil, but dedicated. Rather principles are aligned with the spirit of Mer and the dark principles indulge the self.

Bravery (Paranoia) – Used when you put yourself in harm's way to accomplish your goals.

Paranoia can be used to sacrifice others for your safety, or to distance foes from yourself physically or socially.

Cunning (Brutishness) – Used to think outside the box and pursue creative solutions. Cunning is not *necessarily* intelligence.

Brutishness is used to solve problems without innovation or regard for long term consequences.

Compassion (Obsession) – Useful to aid others, or to overcome problems in ways that cause minimal damage to those in your way.

Obsession is used to pursue goals in ways that hurt yourself, those around you, or Mer itself.

Dedication (Opportunism) – Either to another, or to a cause. Useful to fulfill promises, to remain cool under pressure, or to pursue lasting and established goals.

Opportunism is used to shift goals to better or more convenient ones, or find the path of least resistance.

Tradition (Defiance) – Useful to protect ancient sites and uphold old ways.

Defiance is useful to shirk off dogma or forge new paths.

[[Sidebar: Paranoia vs Fear]]

It is important to note that none of the Dark Principles are merely an extreme lack of their counterparts. The direct opposite of dedication, for instance, would be aimlessness, not opportunism.

In the case of Bravery, especially it is important to note that the dark principle that is its counterpart is *paranoia*, not fear. Fear often leads one to inaction or indecision. A character defined by fear is simply not the sort of person whom stories are told about. In short, she is not a character worthy of being played in the Pirates of Dark Water game.

Paranoia, like all of the principles *and* their dark counterparts, is proactive. A paranoid character, in game terms, will strive to safeguard herself. She will make decisive actions to ensure her own survival. She won't simply avoid dangerous situations, she will build bulwarks against them, she will lie, cheat, and steal to avoid danger—real or imagined. Her actions will drive the story forward, not cause it to fizzle out.

This is not to say that you cannot play a character who is simply a coward, rather than actively paranoid, or that you cannot play a character who is simply undedicated, rather than actively opportunistic, but doing so is represented as having the normal principle at a rating of 1, not by having the principle's dark counterpart. These low-rated principles will allow you to shirk actions in line with their ideals, but their low ratings mean they will not serve a character well when dice are rolled. Passive cowardice is simply not something that drives a person to succeed.

[[End Sidebar]]

Skills

When performing an action in line with a skill you have, you get one free success, and so any action with a difficulty of one automatically succeeds without the need for a roll.

Aim

Steady a crossbow, fire a cannon, launch a harpoon, throw a knife

Construct

Plan a building, build a trap, repair a ship

Design

Paint a portrait, set a jewel in a ring.

Duel

Swing a sword, parry a punch.

Endure

Lift something heavy, brave the elements, hold your breath

Forage

hunt for meat, identify safe or dangerous plants

Grapple

Pin someone to the ground, throw an assailant aside

Influence

Convince a person to do something, inspire emotions in others.

Move

Run fast, climb rigging, leap from ship to ship, swing from a grappling hook

Navigate

Plot a course, read a map, steer a ship.

Notice

Spot an ambush, search a room.

Perform

Sing a beautiful song, play an enchanting rhythm on a drum, communicate with a glance.

Remember

Recall facts, understand ancient writing,

Slink

Hide, steal, move silently

Soothe

Tend to the ill, bandage a wound

Tame

Handle the wild and domestic beasts of Mer, ride a dragon, keep an exotic beast alive.

Gifts

Gifts represent the circumstances of your past and the trajectory of your future. Feel free to come up with new ideas for gifts, and check with your GM before taking them, discussing possible uses, and specific implications.

Ecomancy – You can call upon the inherent magic of Mer to perform magical feats. Ecomancy is the primary sort of magic on Mer, and is deeply tied to its flora, its beasts, and natural phenomena such as tides and weather. Ecomancy can be used to heal beasts and men, to call upon winds, and to bring flowers to bloom. The use of ecomancy requires calling upon one's principles. Dark principles can also fuel ecomancy, but they are at odds with Mer's essential nature, and can produce twisted and undesirable outcomes. More on ecomancy later in this writing.

Heritage – You are not human, or are not FULLY human. Select two special traits that are beneficial and one that is detrimental. Sample beneficial traits include echolocation, gills, sound mimicry, scent tracking, a prehensile tail. Detrimental traits include claws rather than hands, specific dietary concerns, slow movement, or sensitivity to certain substances or phenomena. In addition to these mechanical traits, you may have some unusual morphology due to your heritage.

Destiny – There is a task you MUST complete. You will find yourself in the right places at the right times, and fate seems to conspire for your success. This cannot be intentionally invoked by the player, and is rather a narrative device. Destiny does not effect the outcomes of rolls, but rather moves the hands of fate to ensure that you are always given an opportunity to progress.

Connections – You have allies or old friends throughout Mer, whom you can call on. Either lots of connections that you can call on for very small favors that don't require any risk, or relatively few connections that you can call upon once or twice per episode for larger favors requiring some moderate risk.

Wealth – Most of Mer lives meagerly. Comparatively, you have the benefit of material wealth. You can fund projects, bribe innkeepers, and enjoy the fineries available in major cities. After any major expenditure, you must make strides to replenish your wealth. Things like general cost of comfortable living however, you can cover easily and without making steps to recover your losses.

Treasure – You possess a specific artifact of historic importance. This may command respect from onlookers, and may reveal magical properties over the course of the story. In the series, the Sword of Primus and the Compass are both treasures, as are, obviously, the Thirteen Treasures of Rule. Treasures usually begin with no specific powers, or perhaps very minor ones, but talk to your GM about what sorts of themes you want to tie the treasure to, and its powers will tend to reveal themselves at opportune times, or in response to specific events, such as taking the treasure to an important and ancient site on Mer.

Command – You have command of a vessel and its crew. The crew are EITHER: loyal within reason, but have their own motives and needs OR they are slavishly devoted, but prone to incompetence, OR they are subjugated by fear and force, and ultimately will turn if given the opportunity. If no player character has this gift, the group operate either under an NPC captain or share a ship but with no NPC crew.

Knack – Specialized training or hard-earned experience has left you with two specialized uses of skills. When performing actions within that skill, and rolling dice, you can convert a single die to a success, or gain a free success when not invoking a principle. Sample knacks would include Move (Climbing) or Charm (City Folk). Your knacks can be in the same or different skills.

Heart Link – A beast of Mer is loyal to you. May be a flying dragon, a vicious claw-shark, or an amphibious sea-rat, or any other strange beast of Mer, so long as it is neither sentient nor unique. A creature's heart link to you does not grant you any specific control over it or ability to communicate complex thoughts with it, but it is loyal to you, and you have a good emotional rapport.

Misfortune – If something goes wrong, it goes wrong for you first and most. This affords you a measure of narrative spotlight, and in addition, your tendency to get captured, lost, or stranded may expose you to unique opportunities.

Mentor – An intelligent or insightful teacher offers you advice and guidance

Sturdy – Your frame is bulky. You are fat, muscular, or both, and your increased mass grants you a measure of resilience. Once per scene, when you would suffer a physical consequence for a failed roll or a plot event, you can take the blow and shrug off the effects.

Gadgets – You have access to unique works of craftsmanship that grant special benefits. Select one signature gadget that you always have available, and additionally once per episode you can produce a gadget from your stores that can be used once to solve a particular problem. Folding wings of wood and canvas that allow gliding over long distances or safe fall from great heights would be a gadget, as would a harpoon gun that could be pulled taut after firing to carry sounds across the cord's length to a small cone, allowing eavesdropping through doors at a distance.

Dice

Only player characters have skills and roll dice to complete actions. Nonplayer characters' successes or failures are at the whim of the GM, as makes sense for the story.

When a character wishes to perform an action, first it is determined if they have the proper skill, and sometimes the proper gifts. If so, generally, they may succeed at the action. IF the action is opposed by exceptional difficulty or the intent of another, OR if the character does not have the skill, they may instead need to invoke a principle. Invoking a principle allows the player to roll 3 dice (this game only uses 8 sided dice for all rolls.) Any die showing a number equal to or under the rating of the principle is a success, adding to the free success granted by skill, if any.

Selecting Principles

GM's should be relatively generous in allowing what principle to use, but ensure that the principle match the *methods* of the action, or its *motivating force*, not just the nature of the task. For instance, if a pod of amphocites lay in ambush in a lagoon, cunning seems like the obvious choice to spot them, but to invoke cunning, the character should be required to stay back observing, or utilize innovative testing methods. However, if a character puts himself at risk by wading into the water personally ahead of his allies, it may be bravery, and if a character spots an amphocite ready to ambush an ally, without checking for his own safety, that could be compassion.

Similarly, it may seem obvious that combat is brave, but to use the bravery principle, a character will need to risk his own safety, beyond just engaging in combat.

If the storyteller is not sold that a principle is especially fitting, he should ask the player to lean into the principle harder, or else suggest another principle that might fit better.

If a player cannot make a compelling argument for *any* principle their character possesses, then they can still roll 3 dice and only 1's count as successes. It is not possible to risk it all (see below) on a roll not backed by a principle. The character is simply not invested enough to redouble their efforts.

Difficulty

Any action that can be attempted has a difficulty, representing the number of successes required to complete the task. If a difficulty is 0, then the action simply succeeds, and if it is 1, the action succeeds IF the character has the appropriate skill. If neither of these conditions is true, then the character will need to select a principle, and roll dice as above.

0 – Convince an NPC to indulge a dark principle, throw a hook into the rigging of a nearby ship, lift a table

1 – Convince an NPC to succumb to a normal principle, toss a hook into the porthole of a neighboring ship, lift a small cart

2 – Convince an NPC to do something risky, toss a compass to an ally in a fight, lift a heavy cart

3 – Convince an NPC to do something dangerous or violate a principle, throw a knife to cut rigging on an adjacent ship, lift a portcullis

4 – Convince an NPC to do something dangerous that violates a principle, throw a needle through a keyhole, lift a boulder.

5 – Push the boundaries of what is humanly possible.

Failure

If you do not gain enough successes to do what you intend, you fail, and there are always consequences of that failure beyond simply not accomplishing your goal. Such consequences are

usually light or transient (temporarily losing a belonging, taking a single damage, jamming a lock, alerting a foe to your presence, etc), but see risking it all, below.

Assistance

Some tasks are easier with more people: lifting a heavy log that is blocking a road, searching a room, cooking a feast. Some are not: painting a masterpiece, picking a lock, scaling a cliffside.

When multiple people work together on tasks that benefit more hands, the difficulty of the task decreases. The amount of decrease depends on the number and the nature of the helpers. 3 dock workers will be more help in moving heavy cargo than 10 schoolchildren, and no number of helpers will lower the difficulty of translating an ancient tome if they don't speak the language.

Assistance cannot lower the difficulty of a task below 2.

Risking it all

If you roll and fail, you may redouble your efforts. You roll again. If you succeed this time, you increase the principle's rating by one (to a maximum of 7), as you reaffirm what you stand for. If you fail, you either befall a fate with dire or lasting consequences, or you fall to despair or frustration, replacing a principle with its dark counterpart at the same level (player's choice).

You cannot risk it all if you did not invoke a principle for the roll.

Risking it all with dark principles has no specific drawback on failure, but on a success your principle still increases as normal, making it more difficult to resist in the future. Dark principles may be increased to 8 in this way.

Saving An Ally

If an *ally* fails a roll, you can attempt to rescue them from the downfall of their failure. On a success, you do so safely, and you are both okay. On a failure, you either both succumb to a negative consequence, or you save your ally and you personally succumb to an even worse consequence, at your and the GM's discretion. Talk it over.

The difficulty of this roll is usually 1 higher than the amount the ally failed a roll by.

Succumbing to Principles

When a character chooses to act in a foolhardy, counterproductive, or damaging way because of their principles, they are said to succumb to their principle. A GM can also call for a character to succumb to one of their principles, in which case they must roll one die, and must roll **equal to** or **over** their principle's rating to resist it. This means principles with a rating of one can always be resisted, and no roll is required.

If a character fails to resist the call of their principles, they must act in line with their ideal or must decrease that principle to the number rolled as they are shaken in their resolve.

If a character is unwilling to lower their principle's rating, they may instead exchange the principle for its dark counterpart. In situations like these, you fail to uphold your ideal in a disastrous way, losing your grip on it, entirely. If the brave Ren cannot risk his life to save his friends, then he is not truly brave at all.

Dark principles cannot be lowered to resist their effects, and cannot be swapped for their counterparts on a failed roll. They are self-sustaining and self-affirming. If you roll equal to or under the principle's rating, you simply **MUST** act in line with it, regardless of how disastrous it would be.

However, when a character with a dark principle succumbs to it and is faced with the ramifications of their actions, they may choose to lower the principle's rating by 2. If this would lower the rating to 0 or less, the principle is replaced with its normal counterpart, rated at 1.

Having 1 or 2 dark principles is not uncommon. The world is harsh and it is not always possible to uphold the righteous actions in line with Mer's spirit. A character with 4 dark principles, however, has lost their way in a lasting sense. For such a character, it is no longer possible to lessen a dark principle without extraordinary help from wise and learned souls, potentially using long and arduous regimens or even magic. However, it is never wholly impossible to overcome such ideals, or to change. Even with all five dark principles, a dedicated soul has the option to take control back from his baser urges, with help of those around him.

Conflict

There are times when a roll of the dice is not sufficient to capture the complex and tense struggles of a scene. These scenes are called *conflicts* in the Pirates of Dark Water game.

Every conflict has a Danger, a Goal, and a Tension.

Danger represents how much

Adversaries in combat have difficulties to fight, often with modifiers for certain circumstances or approaches. For instance, a skeev is a formidable foe at difficulty 2, but that difficulty increases by +1 if fought underwater, and increases by a further +1 if fought at close range, owing to its fearsome claws. Massive bulky weapons decrease the difficulty by -1, as they crack and splinter its exoskeleton.

When attempting any rolled action in the presence of an adversary, the difficulty of that action increases by +1 (sometimes more or less depending on the action and the opponent. For instance, it is going to be essentially impossible to carve a beautiful sculpture while being beset by monkeybirds). When risking it all in the presence of a combatant enemy, failure very often means taking damage from an attack, even when the action was not combatitive with the opponent.

[[Sidebar: Combat on Mer]]

At its core, stylistically, this game is based on a children's cartoon. While Mer is harsh and uninhabitable, the game's heroes won't be slitting throats or fatally stabbing enemy pirates. Instead conflicts should be stylish and dynamic, but not excessively violent. Remember that progress toward defeat is not measured in damage to an enemy, but in establishing the circumstances of victory.

[[End Sidebar]]

Exhaustion

Mer's relentless dangers will wear at a person. Exhaustion represents that wear. It encapsulates physical, emotional, and mental fatigue.

All player characters have 5 slots which they can fill with exhaustion. When a character has filled their last slot, they are left panting, or stressed, or overwhelmed. Any failed rolls in this state carry drastic consequences as if they had risked it all, and if you actually do risk it all and fail while fatigued in this way, the consequences are permanent.

Bows, Crossbows, and Launchers

Many ranged weapons in Mer are designed for single use. Gaizer pistols, noxious-breath lizards in funneled glass chambers, can emit their putrid cloud once, and after that, the beast within requires rest and feeding. A speargun or cannon can fire their charges once before requiring recharge.

Weapons that require a passive recharge action, once fired, the user must take an action to perform some other task, during which time they will reload their weapon. This means that, unless you are concealed or being protected, ranged weapons are less useful against very dangerous foes, because you are more likely to take damage with each reload.

Ecomancy

Ecomancy is the primary magical force available to mortals on Mer. Ecomancy may be used to predict or alter the weather, to heal injuries, to commune with beasts, or to generally shape, guide, and divine the natural forces of Mer.

Only ecomancers (characters with the ecomancy gift) can perform these magics. To do so, they select a principle and roll to perform the action. No skill is used as part of ecomancy, and so a maximum of 3 successes is normally possible.

Very powerful ecomancers, who are capable of feats beyond what player characters can accomplish, do exist, but generally to perform large-scale, lasting, or reality-bending feats, even these powerful mystics must work in concert, performing rituals that take hours.

With zero successes, an ecomancer can create light, summon a gentle breeze, get a single flower to bloom, or calm a gentle beast so that it can be approached without it running off in fear.

With one success, an ecomancer can mentally commune with an animal that is not hostile to him, predict the weather, or bend the branches of a tree down.

With two successes, an ecomancer can cover the sun in clouds, calm a violent or aggressive animal, or commune with an ancient site to glean wisdom from Mer itself.

With three successes, an ecomancer can drive back Dark Water for a short time, heal a single damage, or can call lightning down to crack the mast of a ship.

Ecomancy is not usable in combat, except in unusual circumstances, as the narrative dictates. In general, a living being cannot be attacked with ecomancy (although ecomancy might be useable inflict damage on a restrained target in circumstances where the ecomancer can suitably focus).

Characters

Assign principles: One principles must be rated high, at 5 or 6, two principles must be rated low, 1-3, the remaining two principles may be any value 2-5. You may begin with one dark principle instead of its normal counterpart, if you would like.

Select skills and gifts: Totaling 5 between them. At least two of your selections must be skills.

Ren

Bravery 6, Compassion 3, Cunning 5, Dedication 5, Tradition 2

Navigate, Duel

Command, Treasure (Compass of Rule), Destiny (Find the 13 Treasures)

Niddler

Paranoia 5, Compassion 1, Cunning 3, Dedication 1, Tradition 3

Move, Notice, Forage

Heritage (Monkeybird), Misfortune

Tula

Bravery 1, Compassion 3, Cunning 5, *Opportunism* 3, Tradition 2

Slink, Charm, Tame, Aim

Ecomancy

Ioz

Bravery 4, Compassion 1, *Brutishness* 2, Dedication 5, Tradition 2

Grapple, Duel, Endure

Connections (Criminals and pirates, narrow but loyal), Knack (Swordsmanship, Intimidation)

Bloth

Bravery 3, *Obsession* 5, Cunning 5, Dedication 3, Tradition 1

Navigate, Influence

Command, Treasure (The Maelstrom), Mentor (The Dark Sweller)

Mantus

Paranoia 1, Compassion 1, Cunning 6, Dedication 3, Tradition 5

Notice, Remember, Navigate

Ecomancy, Heart Link (riding dagron)

Sample Heritages

Antari – Cave-dwelling people with silvery skin and gaunt limbs. You have access to fine mechanical goods and superb crossbows, and can see in the dark without penalty, but your people have an ongoing feud with the Scon, which cannot be reconciled.

Kree – Beautiful humanoids with pointed ears and fanged mouths, Kree have extraordinary allure to most sentient races, and their natural harmony with nature means that beasts will not attack them unprovoked. However, they are uneasy at sea, being one of the only non-seafaring peoples in Mer.

Monkeybird – Colorful winged and feathered primates, living in the jungle. You can fly (though cannot carry much while flying) and have a keen scent for foods, but are considered a second class citizen.

Beasts and Foes

Amphecite

Combat Difficulty 1 (When hidden +2, Once attached +1)

Amphecites are mucosal, translucent creatures. A difficulty 1 notice check is required to see them, or difficulty 2 in murky water.

If captured alive, an amphecite's natural physiology may be used to one's advantage, affixed over the face, they can hold fresh air and filter oxygen from the water to keep it breathable. Every hour spent wearing the amphecite in this way does allow it to feed, however, dealing one damage.

Clawed Shark

Combat Difficulty 3 (underwater +1, near blood +1)

Taming Difficulty 5 (-1 if calmed with ecomancy, +2 near blood)

Dark Dweller

The Dark Dweller is a mysterious and inhuman creature. Either born of, or perhaps the source of, Dark Water. The Dark Sweller is never seen in person, but may speak through pools of Dark Water.

Zelt

Combat Difficulty 1 (+1 in packs of 4 or more, +1 when they have access to their nests and collections, -1 solo, +1 when trying to escape)

Taming Difficulty 3 (-1 when they can be bribed)

These nasty and disruptive primates have elongated faces and walk semi-upright on their long arms and curled knuckles. They impose a +2 to all difficulties when engaged in combat or when handling small, easily stolen, or visually striking objects, and +1 to difficulties otherwise. These are instead of normal difficulty modifiers.

Curses

The sailors of Mer live difficult lives, and have a colorful and varied vocabulary to express anger, disdain, and frustration.

Ay Chongo (or Ay Chongo Chipango)

A curse used to express frustration or exasperation. The longer version is more severe.

Chongo Longo

An insult, not too serious or specific in nature. Sometimes used on its own to express disapproval. You might call a crewmate a chongo longo when they make a simple mistake or shout it in surprise when ambushed.

Jitaten

An adjective and adverb used as a general intensifier or to express disdain (“I can’t get this jitaten thing open!” or “I’m so jitaten hungry!”) Sometimes used playfully to express affection during moments of heightened emotions (“Get over here, you jitaten fool!” might be a greeting for a friend you have not seen in a long time.)

Naja Dog

One of MANY animal-based insults, and by far the most common. Used to express that someone is cowardly, of low station, or undeserving.

Noy Jitat

An interjection used to express strong emotion in general. Surprise, anger, disapproval, even joy. The all-purpose swear of Mer, like “oh fuck” in English.

Rudderless

Of a person or an idea, lacking common sense or merit.

Scupango

An adjective marking someone or something as deceptive, vile, or corrupt. Sometimes used metaphorically to mean uncooperative, of an inanimate object.

Insults comparing people to Merian animals or nautical phenomena can be used hurtfully or playfully based on context. “fish lips,” “pig face,” “smool brain,” “half-masted” and “sea scum” are all used in the series. Naja Dog and Rudderless are the most common, but the curses of Mer are varied and colorful. Get creative!

Oaths like “By the abyss,” “By Kunda,” “By the Fires of Fezwa” or “By the Moons of Mer” are often used to express the gravity of a situation, either on their own in response to serious events, or as part of a promise.