

ROGUELIKE

A Duo Adventure Game



Introduction

Legendary beasts, dark sorceries, and cities of sapphire and silver. Fortune and glory beckon beyond the horizon—your cunning, spirit, and the blades in your hands will claim them. A clash of steel, a whispered threat, and together you carve your path through danger!

Duos of adventuring Rogues are a staple of fantastic literature—Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, Elric and Moonglum, Finn and Jake, and many more. In Roguelike, you and a partner will spin a two-fisted tale of fantasy in about half an hour. Let's get started!

(Note: If it works for you, just follow along with the Prompts in **BOLD**. If not, have at it!)

ROGUELIKE

Written and Designed by Marc Majcher

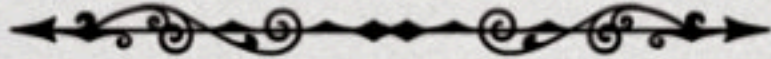
© 1983 Majcher Arcana Games

At <https://majcher.itch.io/>

All art from the public domain



Part One: The Story



Create the Rogues

To create your characters, each player draws a card from the Roguelike Tarot Deck. (If you don't have one, so sad, but a normal tarot deck or even a plain deck of playing cards will do.) Determine the character's profession and status according to the card you've drawn:

Coins (or diamonds): Thief, burglar, highwayman, etc.

Swords (or spades): Warrior, soldier, mercenary, etc.

Cups (or hearts): Priest, monk, cleric, etc.

Wands (or clubs): Wizard, sorcerer, warlock, etc.

Aces are lowest status (street thug, town guard, novice, apprentice, etc.)

Kings are highest status (head of thieves' guild, general, high priest, archmage, etc.)

(If you've drawn a Major Arcana, put it back and try again!)

Name your Rogues—if you need inspiration, look at the letters on the card you drew and build a fantasy-sounding word from those. You don't need to talk about the characters or introduce them to each other just yet, but it won't hurt if you do. It's totally fine to have two mid-tier fighters, or a gutter thief and a grand wizard working together, you'll work that all out together soon.

That's it! Your pair of Rogues are ready to begin their tale...



Illustration of various weapons including swords, daggers, and knives, arranged in a row.

Peril in the Middle

Your story is told by your rogues to an audience at a tavern or around a campfire. You'll start by describing a scene of peril in the middle of some action, then go back to tell the entire thing from the beginning—with occasional interruptions and interjections from the other storyteller.

One player draws a card to inspire a location, and introduces it: "There we were..."

"...in the teeming Johdur Marketplace"

"...at the mountain sanctuary of Nisath"

"...aboard the merchant vessel Horizon"

The other player draws a card to inspire a peril, and introduces it: "In great peril..."

"...pursued by the city watch!"

"...trapped in a burning temple!"

"...lost in the darkness!"

The first player amplifies the peril: "But worse than that..."

"...we were still bound in iron manacles!"

"...we'd become stuck under fallen timbers!"

"...we found ourselves waist deep in filthy bilge water!"

The second player increases the peril further: "And even worse than that..."

"...they'd cornered us in a dead-end alley!"

"...we were still paralyzed by the cultists' drugs!"

"...the ship was being pulled under by a giant tentacle!"

You may continue heightening the trouble back and forth if you feel like the danger isn't dangerous enough, but twice should usually do it.

The Story Begins

When their situation can get no worse, cut back to the Rogues recounting the tale of their adventure—one asks another: "How did we get ourselves into that mess?"

The story unfolds in a series of beats, kind of like a scaffolding to guide you as you create the narrative together. It's not meant to be restrictive, but helpful—don't worry if you deviate from the structure given here, but know that it's always there to fall back on if you feel lost.

The main beats are as follows:

The Rogues individually run into (or cause) some trouble in a relatively familiar situation. They each show off their particular skills and strengths, working together to overcome or escape, and end as companions.

The Rogues embark on the main adventure of the story, encountering increasingly difficult challenges along the way, always overcoming them together. Between acts of heroism, they will relax with each other and begin to share things about themselves, or their pasts.

Eventually, they will find themselves in the peril described initially, and they must use all their abilities to escape, with some kind of cost.

A complication or twist is introduced, leading to the final confrontation or trial that the Rogues must defeat. With their combined abilities, they will overcome the challenge (probably?) and conclude the story.

The most important thing to remember is that you are capital-H Heroes! You may endure great danger, suffering even, but you will always come out on top in the end. So never be afraid to shovel heaps of trouble upon yourselves—the worse it is, the cooler it will be when you win!

At any time in your telling, either Rogue may draw a card for inspiration for a danger, location, theme, detail, letters to create person or place names, or anything else they like. You don't need to use what's on the card exactly—they're for inspiration, so use them however you like.

Act One: Introduction

First, you must introduce your Rogues to your audience by name and reputation.

"I'm Name One, the First Occupation.
.."

"And I'm Name Two, the Second
Occupation, and it all began when...
."

The Rogue then begins the tale by describing where they were and what they were doing. Draw a card for inspiration, and look at the Location on the right side—feel free to alter, embellish, or ignore the prompt if you think of something you like better.

"It all began when I was in
Location, and I was..."

The Rogues in turn describe the location, and a little about why they were there. Guarding a temple? Planning a robbery? Issuing a challenge? Running across the rooftops? Sneaking through the shadows? Minding your own business? Feel free to add as many details as you like, but keep it crisp—the Rogues haven't met each other at this point, and we want to see how that happens!

Eventually, one or both of the Rogues will stumble into (or cause) some trouble, running into each other in the process—the trouble may, in fact, be each other! The situation should be dangerous, but relatively low stakes—we're just starting off here, and we've got plenty of time for more.

Whatever the predicament may be, the Rogue will each describe how they overcome their piece of the trouble using their own particular skills and strengths. This is your first opportunity to show off your Rogue—don't hold back!

Eventually, the trouble will be resolved successfully due to the combined efforts of the Rogues, and they will find themselves quick companions. They may be on the run together, celebrating a successful swindle, exploring a strange new place together, sheltering in a stable, or enjoying the newfound hospitality of a sultan—wherever they are, they're together, like it or not.

Act Two: The Adventure

Now that the Rogues are together, the adventure begins in earnest. Draw a card to inspire your main quest—this is the main motivation for everything you'll do from here on out. It doesn't need to be complicated or elaborate, just enough to get going. Just look at where you ended up at the end of the introduction, sprinkle on some elements from the card, and you're off! There are plenty of commonplace types of objectives—if you're stuck, just pick something from the list below and add whatever details make sense for your story.

"Together, we discovered something..
."

...we needed to take a thing or person somewhere

...we needed to get a thing or person from somewhere

...we needed to defeat an great enemy

...we needed to win a contest

...we needed to remove or neutralize something

...we needed to defend a location

from something

...we needed to escape from somewhere

...we needed to get into somewhere

...we needed to stop a thing from happening

...we needed to ensure that a thing happened

...we needed to avenge a wrong

...we needed to broker a deal with someone

...or we just heard about a treasure, and wanted it

There's no "refusal of the call" here—your Rogues want to do something, so they just go and do it!

The First Challenge

The first step of their quest will bring the Rogues into conflict with some kind of challenge. This should, like the trouble in the introduction, be significant, but not too difficult to overcome. The stakes are higher this time, though—

you need to overcome this in order to proceed!

Again, draw a card to inspire the challenge—this may be directly associated with your quest, or it might just be someone or something that happens to be in the way. Either way, this is another chance to show off the unique things that make your Rogues cool and interesting—work together to overcome the obstacle without too much trouble. Easy, right?

The First Rest

After overcoming the challenge, your Rogues can take a break to rest and regroup. This is a "campfire" scene where you can explore the Rogues' backgrounds, thoughts, motivations, or whatever you like. At some point, one of you will reveal something about your Rogue that we didn't know before, and the other will respond to that revelation. It doesn't need to be anything dramatic or earth-shaking, this is just a chance to get to know our Rogues a little better.

The Second Challenge

After the first rest, we're off again! Draw another card to inspire a new challenge that the Rogues

encounter in the process of pursuing their goal. This should be pretty dangerous, and the stakes again are a bit higher! But our Rogues are awesome, and though a normal person would struggle to overcome this trouble, they're able to put their skills and talents together to overcome it—with a bit more work, this time. Okay, maybe this quest isn't so easy after all...

The Second Rest

After passing the second challenge, our Rogues will again find a place to take a breath and talk about themselves a bit. This time, the Rogue who didn't reveal something about themselves last time will share something—it might be more personal or important, but don't sweat it.

Now it's time for the real challenge!



Act Three: The Peril

The third step in the Rogues' quest leads them into their greatest peril yet—but we already know what it is, because it's the impossible situation that we set up at the start of the story! If you want more inspiration, again, draw a card and use it to propel yourself into the trouble you described in the Peril in Middle section. Describe the situation in more detail, emphasize how dangerous and impossible it is, and then pause... you want to know how it turned out, right?

"How did we get out of that?" "Well..."

This is where it's fun to sit back and let the fictional audience of your story cook a little bit. Feel free to have your storytelling Rogues take their time getting to the action, banter a bit, go off on a tangent, whatever you feel like is fun. You've got the framing device—use it!

Of course, our Rogues will escape the peril—they're here to tell the tale, right? To escape this situation, you'll need to pull out every trick and dig deep to find the strength and wit to survive, but survive you will. One or both of the

Rogues will most likely need to sacrifice something important to them to make it, as well...

a treasured item or heirloom described when talking about their past?

a favorite tool or weapon?

something they needed to complete their quest?

a belief, principle, or something integral to who they thought they were?

a hand, maybe? No, that's too much... right?

After the escape, draw one more card—this will inspire a big twist or complication that changes what they think they know about their main objective!

It's also a great time for one last rest scene to talk about what happened, or strategize about what must be done. They won't be deterred, though, and off they go...



Act Four: The Confrontation

This is it—the Rogues finally reach the goal of their adventure, and it will be a tremendous challenge. But we've seen the Rogues in action before, at their best and their worst, and we know that they will emerge victorious... right?

Take turns describing the peril of the situation, going back and forth, increasing the danger and the stakes, advancing and falling back, winning and losing elements of the final challenge until... well, that's up to you to decide. It's most likely that the Rogues will pull out all the stops and achieve the thing that they set out to do. It's also possible that they will fail in an interesting way, and extract themselves from the situation somehow! Do whatever feels right.

Either way, fortune is not the fate of our Rogues—they may achieve great acclaim or pocket a valuable treasure, but fame is fleeting, and gold is quickly spent in celebration. But the Rogues remain companions, and continue on.

"And ever since that day..."

Wrap up the story in whatever way feels good, and end your tale.

"We had many other adventures, of course, but that's a story for another time..."

Part Two: Tips and Warm-Ups

Hey, not everyone is comfortable just improvising a whole story right out of the gate. That's okay!

If you're not ready to dive into storytelling just yet, try playing some of these warmup games with your partner first, to help get yourself jump-started.



Convergence

It's important to be on the same page as your partner when telling a story together, this is a fun way to get synced up. Basically, you're trying to say the same word as your partner—easy, right?

Count to three together: "One... two... three!" and then each say a word. Unless you're very lucky, they'll be different words, and you'll try again, giving a new word that's somewhere between those two. Eventually, you should come together on the same word—although that might take a while the first few times—at which time you should celebrate your success!

"One... two... three..."

"Vegetable!"

"Blacksmith!"

"Dagger!"

"Spinach!"

"Iron!"

"Chopping!"

"AXE!" "AXE!"

Five Things

One person picks a category, and the other person names five things in this category as quickly as possible, while the first person counts them off. This is to help build your confidence in thinking up details on the fly, and also to learn that it doesn't matter if you make mistakes or say something nonsensical, since your partner will always accept your offers!

The trick here is to not think about it too much, and deliver your answers with confidence, even if you know they're "wrong". Switch off taking turns being the person coming up with things, then when you're feeling comfortable, you can challenge yourselves by making it more than five, coming up with harder categories, or (and I think this is the most fun) categories that are "impossible" somehow—as long as you're quick and sure, you can't go wrong!

"Name five things that might be in a treasure chest!" "Gold!" "ONE!" "Diamonds!" "TWO!" "Ummm... a poison trap!" "THREE!" "Uh... a sandwich?" "FOUR!" "And... a baby!" "FIVE!" "WOOOO!"

"Okay, give me the names of five

dead gods!" And so on.

Alphabetical List

This is similar to Five Things, in that it helps you get comfortable coming up with things in a fantasy setting. In this warmup, you'll take turns naming things in a category that you decide together, but they must start with letters going through the alphabet, starting with "A".

Ideas for categories: Spells, Cities, Royalty, Regional Food, Ancient Religions, Patrons at a Tavern, Legendary Weapons, Things in a Tomb, Horrible Diseases,

Alphabet category: spells, cities, dead kings, food, religions, innkeepers, weapons

Roguelike Story Spine

This is the super condensed version of the full Roguelike story structure! It should only take a few minutes to play, and helps give a general feel for what a story like this is shaped like. Just complete each line with as much or as little detail as you like, and in just a few minutes, you'll have told a mini-Roguelike story!

Once two Rogues found themselves in extreme peril...

"How did we get into this mess?!?"
Well, once upon a time they were in a place...

And every day they were highly skilled, each in their own way...

And they demonstrate their heroic skills thusly...

But this day was like no other, because...

And because of that...

And because of that they were able to escape the previously mentioned peril...

And because of that they found a very different peril...

Until finally they escaped that peril as well and got an unexpected result...

And ever since that day...

And they had many other adventures..



Rogue's Story Beats

It can be useful to think of a story built out of certain kinds of blocks—in our case, the Rogues' tale includes getting into various kinds of trouble or danger, escaping that trouble or danger in a heroic manner, learning or discovering new things about a fantasy world, learning or discovering things about our Rogues, and having the Rogues' plans thwarted by the unexpected.

If you look at the default structure of Roguelike, you'll see a progression that looks like this:

Discovery -> Perilous -> Rogues -> Campfire

With some Tangle blocks thrown in here and there for flavor. Let's take a look at the blocks:

Discovery

Everything kind of builds on Discovery—without knowing about the world or what it's like, you can hardly tell a story about the people in it, can you? This is where you get to discover the world together, uncovering new things about the setting or illuminating details that you'd like to highlight more. Use stuff from this phase to inform

everything else!

Perilous

This is where you'll introduce danger and excitement! The trouble ramps up throughout the story, starting with something easily overcome at the beginning, all the way through the climax. The best part is, you don't have to worry about not getting out of any mess you're put into—you're already out and telling the story! So heap it on—the more trouble you get into the cooler you look when you find your way out of it. As the danger level increases, be sure to endanger or threaten the things that your Rogues hold dear or find important, not just putting them in harm's way themselves.

Rogues

And this is where you get out of the trouble you found yourselves in during the Perilous block. In the Rogues phase, go all out, and highlight anything that you think makes your Rogue awesome or unique. Are they the best at fighting? Fast talking? Running away? Sorcery or base trickery? Whatever it is, that's what they use, and it always works, because you're the heroes!

Campfire

After all the action, it's time to take a breather and get to know our Rogues a bit better. In the Campfire phase—whether they're at an actual campfire or not—you'll be relatively safe, so you can talk about how you rest and recover from your recent adventures. This is also when you can go deeper into exploring your Rogues' character and relationships, talk about your feelings, etc.

Tangle

Of course, not everything is going to go the way you planned. A Tangle block is where something that your Rogues didn't know about previously rears its head and throws everything into chaos. It might be something supernatural, a secret that someone's been keeping from you, or just plain something you were blithely unaware of. Whatever it is, it means a big change, and your Rogues will have to find a way to adjust.

Techniques for Storytelling

Here's a list of things to try if you ever get stuck or lost telling your story. You don't have to do all of them—or any of them!—so don't worry about trying to remember them all, just take a look over here whenever you feel like you need a little bit of inspiration.

Listen to what the other Rogue just said—repeat it out loud, if necessary—and just add a detail or consequence that directly comes from that. Build on each other's ideas—it's way less work than creating something entirely from scratch!

If you can't come up with a new story element, think about cool or vivid things that came up earlier, and bring them back, reincorporating into the story in a fresh way. (Feel free to write down especially neat things when they happen, so you don't have to remember!)

Interject from the tavern/campfire framing setup. Put them in an awkward situation ("isn't what when you ran into your former lover?"), set them up for heroism ("that's when you drove off that roc single-handedly, right?"), or give them

something ridiculous to do ("the bards still sing the song about your victory there—how did that go, again?").

Ask the other Rogue for details—what they remember seeing or feeling, why they were doing something, if they already knew a person or a place, etc. ("Paint the Scene")

Do something to throw your personality into contrast with the other Rogue. (e.g. If they're gregarious, be secretive; if they're cowardly, be brave; if they're generous, be greedy.)

Play non-Rogue characters for each other! When they're interacting with a shopkeeper, sorcerer, bandit king, or talking fox, be that person for a bit, and give them more trouble.

Use peril and danger to discover your strengths. The worse the situation is, the more you get to discover about yourself when you find a way out of it.

Zoom in or out of the story! Talk about what's happening in the city or area around you, or focus into a specific aspect of the current scene and really flesh it out—you never know what can spring from the smallest bit.

Alternate between colorful descriptions (adding sensory details to everything, wax about the emotions happening,) and moving the action forward (skip travel, shopping, or other boring bits, use time jumps to get to the good parts). Edit aggressively!

When you don't know what happens next, introduce something actively or passively helpful or harmful. (The Wizard/Map/Ninja/Bomb matrix!)

Inspirations and Notes

Fritz Lieber, Michael Moorcock,
Robert E. Howard, etc.

Roguelike improv duo w/Marc Majcher
and Ryan Hill

Roguelike Tarot Deck

Swords Without Master / Rogue Scroll
by Epidiah Ravachol

Roguelike pcio file for
playingcards.io (and instance)

Google Sheets walkthrough cards

TBD: Prompts for getting into
trouble and out



Promo

Roguelike RPG will let you grab one
friend and play out a fantasy "buddy
adventure" in half an hour or less,
with absolutely no preparation. It's
perfect for little fill-in games!

Since the Roguelike Tarot was
inspired by our fantasy improv duo,
"Roguelike", I've written up the
format we used into a proper two-
player rpg.

The Roguelike RPG is half "how to
play the game" and half warmups and
exercises to get you excited to
play, and help practice useful
skills for playing!



YOU FOUND THE WUMPUS!

ROGUELIKE by Marc Majcher
Majcher Arcana ©1983

MAJCHER



ARCANA