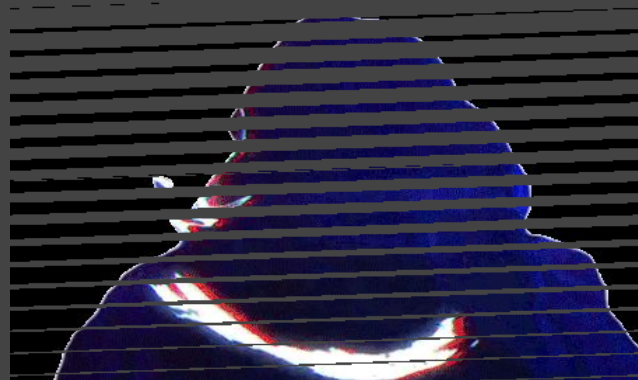


MAKING BETTER THIEVES GUILDS: BEYOND THE HEIST



A Workshop

AGENDA

All Images used for this presentation were pulled from Google Stock Photos, Stickers, and Gifs (With one Wikipedia image from Gina Bellman's Wiki page from Leverage.)



01

Introduction to Crime and
Detection

02

Being a Fantasy Criminal or
Investigator

03

Basics of Money Laundering

04

The Face and Shadow
Partnerships

05

Crafting a Criminal Network

06

Q & A

Hey there,

WELCOME



+



=



Let's talk about
doing crime (in a
purely fictional
hypothetical
framework)

Introduction to Crime and Detection

As long as there are Rogue characters, there will always be the Paladins, just waiting to spoil your fun.



01 Rogues

Thieves in tabletop games can be in the party, they can take items from enemies, they can employ the players to pull off great heists.



02 Paladins

Detect Evil is short code for killjoys. Paladins make everything more difficult by just existing in the setting with a lie detector spell on hand.



03 Conflict

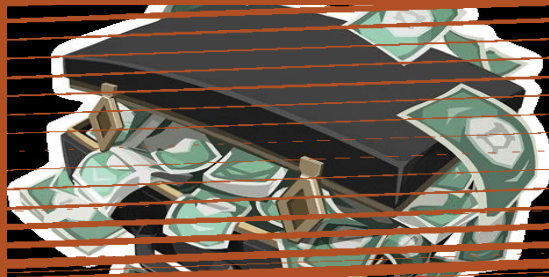
This creates two separate but equally interesting roles in fantasy crime. Those who take the loot, and those who stab the rogue for taking the loot.

CRIME GOALS

YOUR MEME

01 Why do you have to explain puns to Kleptomaniacs?

Because they take things, literally. Taking things is just the first step in crime, it's often the only one that tables represent in fantasy games.



02 What do you do with a piece of art?

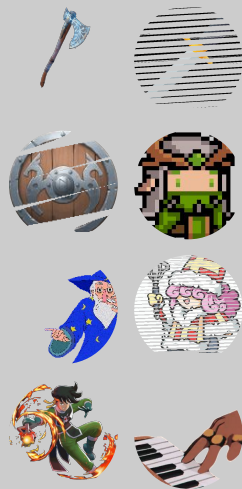
Stealing a priceless painting helps no one, because you'll never sell it. Extremely rare artifacts too. Crime has to have an end goal.

03 So what's the use?

Theft generates income. Not just for the thief, but for several layers of related businesses and required steps. Your games can go deeper into investigation or the efforts needed to get away with a heist.

There is a strategy to crime, it's to get money. But often, you don't just *take money*, you have to take *things*, and *things* are complicated.

Form a group!



The whole party
can get involved
in on a good
heist.

Group A

Fantasy Thieves have the hard work to do.

- 1) Identify a Mark
- 2) Scope the Location
- 3) Plan the Heist
- 4) Conduct the Heist
- 5) Contract a Fence
- 6) Wait for the Money
- 7) Spend Wisely

Group B

Fantasy Paladins have the easy job.

- 1) Hope Group A makes a mistake in any of the steps to the left.

...Yeah, that's about right.

The challenge

Instead of making a heist scene about simply retrieving goods and handing them off to a guild, you can expand this by having the party expand into a criminal network, talking to the fence, making contacts with local businesses to launder the money for a crime boss so that there is a record of income and taxes, and take all of the added steps that would otherwise be forgotten.

There is actually a lot of good roleplay elements that could be included in a more realistic take on fantasy financial crimes.

So what do you add to Heists?

1

Complex Locations

Include details about the building, but allow players to suggest elements and challenges of their own.

Added guards, magical security, ways to temporarily disable aspects, but then add a time limit (Clock Pieces or Round Numbers in Initiative.)

2

Unknown Elements

Don't let them make up everything, think of one or two twists that are minor challenges that can occur.

For example, an additional guard shows up early for their shift, a storm adds light from lightning strikes, breaking cover of darkness, magic flares create erratic shifts in defenses.

3

Tempting Offers

Imagine you are in the middle of a heist that is going fine, but an item you've been seeking for years is also in the same vault under a special protection you're unprepared for.

You might never find this again.

What do you do?

4

Plot Twists

Beyond the classic double cross, what if the problem is not that you can't trust thieves from the guild you hired, but that a competing guild from another part of the country is after the same item.

You just got to it first, but now your party is wanted by a rival!

So what do you add to Detection?

1

They had a Partner

Assume you're the group hired to prevent or recover a theft.

An easy way to make it more interesting is to not make the enemy an expert thief, but instead, a duo that are two experts who normally never work together.

Adds lore, increases the challenge rating.

2

Corruption at the Temple

If it's a religious organization with a theft, what if there was a leak who told about the security, include clues that someone might have wanted to stage the theft, and build more than just a simple "Thief got in" plot line and have someone high ranking be corrupt.

3

Inside Jobs

Expanding on that idea, what if the entire theft was in fact staged, and the item was just pawned off to cover debts of someone who had access?

A plotline in many shows is that things were not stolen, but it was just hiding debts.

4

Plot Twists

Beyond the classic plot twists of corruption and inside jobs, what if the thieves were then later dispatched by a greater villain, and instead of following the trail to the loot, it is followed to another mystery - murder to cover up a theft?

Creating Opposition



Roguey McRoguerson

Aspiring Thief

Reasonable Rates

The value of having well rounded thieves is it tends to create more tension and dynamic story.

Area of expertise

Have them know history, the arts, lore, and be fonts of valuable information beyond just knowing what sells.

Academic background

Disgraced Academics make excellent thieves, include a reason they had to use their knowledge for this pursuit.

Damning Motives

- Crime isn't typically motivated by greed (except white-collar)
- Crime is an act of desperation to survive.



Pally “The Runner” Paladino

Thief Catcher

Mixed Results

The value of a well rounded investigator with complex morality is that it makes them hard to fully *like* as a character.

Detective Jerkface

Making heroic characters unlikeable deviates from “Copaganda” tropes.

Flawed People

The value of a complex character on the approved side of the law is that the party need not respect them, but should challenge them.

Vices and Pride

- Give characters who seek out the thieves major character flaws.
- Expose their vices, show their vulnerabilities.

So, at a VERY high level



How does money laundering work?

Money Laundering has 3 classical phases, that are Placement, Layering, and Integration.

This occurs after cash has been stolen, or illegal sales have generated criminal proceeds, or for the sake of the argument, Fantasy Prohibition Bathtub Gin Revenue.

The problem is that tax assessors, even fantasy tax assessors, will know that you can't just drop 20,000 gold and say "Well, we slayed a dragon." Because unless you have a Dragon corpse, no one is buying that.

Also you'll pay about 35% in taxes for recovered goods.

So the task then comes into 3 phases, first get the cash into the financial system in what appears to be a legitimate way.

This is the Placement Stage, typically by using a cash intensive business to have an extra income deposited.

A "second set of books" is the illegal \$\$\$.

From here, it's deposited. But it can't just go right back to you. That's where the Layering phase comes in.

Layering is creating a series of transfers in order to hide the trail of funds. Think of it like hackers bouncing their location off satellites.

Layering requires several related businesses and schemes of fake sales, invoices, and other forms of fraud to make something appear as legitimate income for the criminals.

Shadow partnerships and investors are where a lot of this comes in.

Once the funds have been layered and staged to look like legitimate income from these fake businesses, you simply cash your check as a member of Definitely Legitimate Corporation Enterprises.

It's a lot more complicated than that, but this is more than enough to get the players roleplaying a ton.

This would probably still work in 1982, but Anti-Money Laundering as a field has evolved, especially since 2000, that while this is very basic information from the field, it wouldn't work if anyone tried it.
So, disclaimed, crime is more complicated now. Don't do crime, Kids.

Now that you're bored.

What Elements of this can you USE?



For Rogues

Have the criminal network make them do the leg work on finding businesses to launder money. Taverns & inns, item shops, and shipping businesses.

Make them scout the businesses to see who would take say, 1 gold for every 50 laundered, as a “cut” of the proceeds. Every layer needs to get something for it.

Make the Rogues create front companies doing fake business to earn “income” from these laundered proceeds. They can even be charities.

For Paladins

Have them try to identify where they money flows. Get the banks to work with them to identify sources. Try and find members of the org who might talk.

Fake invoices and companies often ship defective goods that get destroyed, or have empty warehouses of goods that never were meant to sell, only appear to sell. Find the Warehouse.

The Face, and Shadow Partnerships

Criminals don't often get their hands dirty, not the ones leading an organization. They have a representative, and otherwise sit in the shadows of their criminal empire.

Utilize a figurehead who is in control of the Guild, or a large criminal enterprise. This person should be tactful, cautious, intelligent, and ruthless. While they may have risen to this position by performing minor crimes, they should almost never do their own work, not anymore. This is usually the 2nd in command, not the head.

Why it's a good idea

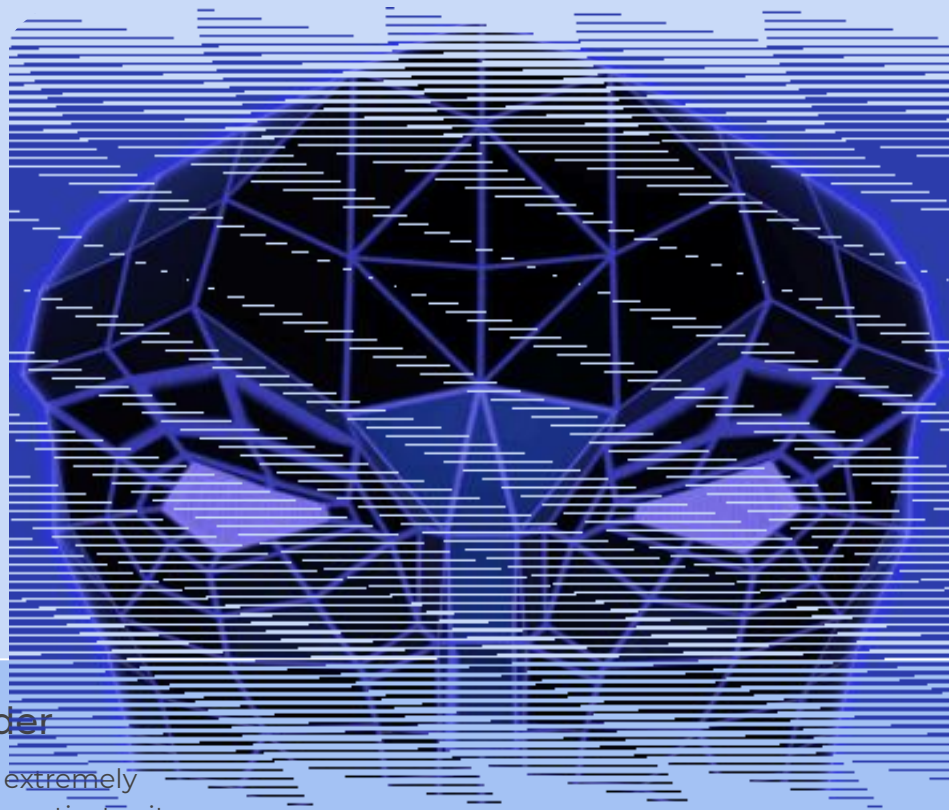
Giving the player a threat that they cannot directly confront safely, and who they either work for, or are with temporarily, creates tension and generates the need to make big plans against this figure.

Knowledge is the weapon a Shadow Partner uses most.

Aspects to consider

Loyalty to a mob boss is extremely powerful, and while fear motivates it, greed can outweigh it. Buying off lower members of an organization after many heists is entirely possible.

Evidence will almost never connect back to the main villain in any usable way.



Roles Comparison

Shadow Characteristics

The Shadow figure might make themselves known after a certain period of time with the Party performing work for them, likely to convince them to take a final big job. Conversely, if a Paladin gets too close to the organization, they might get a personal threat.

- Shadows will know every facet of the business.
- They may be a figure who is known from the past of the area.
- Assume they will be considered a legend.



Flaws to Consider

While admin of running a criminal organization takes a lot of effort, assume that the party can press and strain resources with coordinated problem creating.

Face Characteristics

Businesses who provide cover for their crimes know the Face, not the boss. Only those who are earliest into the enterprise would even know the Boss exists. Assume the Face is the figurehead, and while arrogant, is likeable. Good Personality is a weapon.

- The Face will be a known quantity in the area.
- People will know they're a danger, but also not challenge them.
- Guards and Constables will know the Face is too dangerous.

Flaws to Consider

A Face has ambitions to take over from the Shadow and Mastermind, but not the skills. They won't admit to it yet.



Put the Shadow at the Seat of the Organization, they are the head of it.

Everyone reports to someone who reports to the Shadow, but only a select few report to the Shadow.

The Face handles business relationships.

Operate with them engaging the party, working with guards, talking to business organizations.

Businesses reporting to the Face would be those laundering money, shipping illegal goods, greasing palms with bribes, and collecting tributes or insurance.

Those working for the Face would be generally affable criminals, who talk well and tend to lean on their charms to solve problems.

The Muscle should be a threat behind the scenes that works adjacent to the Face, but is not public.

The Muscle is who gets sent in when lessons need to be given.

The Muscle tends to work through the problems by fighting them. Those who encounter the Muscle have broken trust, contracts, or timelines that are expected.

Those who work for the Muscle are rough and tumble types, but not necessarily unintelligent, just certainly capable of applying pressure to the right joints and flexible parts.

So how do you craft a criminal network?

Everything has to flow, preferably in a circular pattern, where activity that generates income, starts the circle.

Predicate Offenses, those which generate cash like theft, fraud, sale of illegal items, smuggling, etc. starts the process. From there, various businesses that deal in currency would be valuable for moving extra coin and hiding proceeds from crime, resulting in high value businesses as fronts for proceeds of the higher ranking members of the organization, think art galleries and auction houses.

How does the cycle restart?

Reinvesting funds from the criminal activity in expanding the empire over time.

Increase network, scope, scale, promote new lieutenants.

Why it might fail.

Moving too quickly, being too greedy, and exposing too much of the organization to detection from tax assessors, Paladins, etc.





The Shadow manages from well - The Shadows



The Face interacts with social contacts.

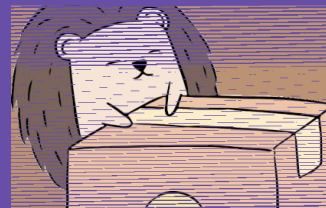


The Muscle handles threats and problems.



Auction houses pay workers with income and laundered proceeds.

Taverns and Inns can take in extra cash and pay out to businesses like shippers.



Shipping entities pay extra to auctions and get cash from Taverns & Inns

Added Details

First

Have a top-down pyramid structure, but make sure the top is protected and unknown to most of the organization for protection.



Second

The Lieutenants (Face and Muscle) will be absolutely loyal, to a fault, but if pressed correctly, able to be turned on either each other, or the entire organization in a coup attempt.



Third

The network will be BIG. It needs to be able to pass off a few hundred coins a day, minimum, to maintain costs, and expects to lose at least half of the income from illegal activity, so assume for every 1,000 gold/week there should be 10 businesses.



Fourth

Get creative, invent problems that they can fix, have them integrated in the community, volunteer charitable acts and organizations, anything they can “cook the books” on the price of so that it’s harder to pin down.



Now feel free to ask any questions you have, or pose examples of scenarios and we can build out how we'd add some layers of realism and challenges to either Rogues or Paladins.

**Thank you for
Attending!**

