

The Book of Hanz

Fate Core Thought of the Day

Being a compilation of musings concerning the Fate RPG done by Robert Hanz on Google+.

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What's Fate?

A few posts have got me thinking about this, and it's a thought that's been in my head for a while in other ways - mostly around the whole "if you're hacking, what are the 'safer' things to hack, and at what point are you mucking with the base assumptions of the system?"

Much like +[Ryan Macklin](#)'s post, I tend to think of Fate as being a specific game, that does specific things. It can cover a wide variety of settings, but it does so in a very Fate-like way. There's things Fate is super-awesome at, and things that Fate isn't super-awesome at. When I want to do something that Fate isn't super-awesome at, I tend to just pull out a game that **is** super-awesome at that.

I don't consider that a negative on Fate in any way. I have a Jeep Wrangler. It's good at some things (transportation), awesome at other things (off-roading), and absolutely sucky at certain things (hauling lots of things, carrying lots of people, going fast). And making my Wrangler better at those things would almost necessarily make it worse at the things it does really well right now.

So I don't use Fate to play D&D. I might use Fate to run a game in a D&D setting, but I don't think it would feel much like the D&D **game** - I've previously described what I think it would be as more like "D&D: The Movie: The Game" (no, not the horrible movie, but an imaginary good one).

Yeah, I **could** hack Fate enough to run a passable "D&D game", but would it still be Fate in any recognizable way? I don't think it would, because the core questions and assumptions of D&D are very different than those of Fate. Which, again, isn't a knock on Fate or on D&D, much like saying that my Wrangler isn't as fast as a Ferrari isn't a knock on my Wrangler.

So, what are the things that I consider to be "Fate"? Not as some kind of purity test, but rather as a more general gauge - if I see a Fate build that hits 95% of these, it'll probably "feel like" Fate to me. But if I see something that's ostensibly Fate that only hits 10% of things, it probably won't push those Fate buttons very well.

Proactive characters

This is, to me, one of the biggest. Fate characters are proactive. They make things happen. The game progresses as a result of their actions.

This seems like all games, but it's really not - it's an argument that railroading doesn't belong in Fate games. If you know what's going to happen, then at some level the characters aren't proactive. They're just looking for the magic "next scene" button. They have no real agency. And some games and styles are built heavily upon this kind of game structure. Which is fine - I just don't necessarily think it's a good fit for Fate.

It also makes it a good question whether investigation-based games are a super-awesome fit for Fate, either. Investigation-based games are usually about following the breadcrumb that is left, which is often not very proactive on the part of the players. It also makes the level of narrative control that Fate gives players somewhat problematic.

Competent characters

Fate characters are competent. They're **good** at stuff. Maybe not the best in the world, but whatever they're good at, they're **good** at it. They're not bumbling amateurs.

Skills, aspects, compels, invokes

To me, this is the core of Fate. You can get rid of stunts and still have it "feel like" Fate, but if these four elements don't work more or less how they do in Core, it doesn't feel much like Fate to me.

The phase trio

This has been around, and almost unchanged, since SotC. It works, and how it generates interlinked characters is, to me, a pretty important part of the Fate experience.

Lack of charop

As a game, Fate seems to almost go out of its way to minimize character optimization. Discussion of what stunts do is directly opposed to the idea of

"hey, let me find the combination of stuff that makes me awesome", as a general table veto is **built into** the process.

"Final" skills

One of the things I really appreciate about Fate is the idea that skills represent your **final** ability to influence a scene - not your base ability that's then modified by a gazillion other factors. This ties in pretty heavily with the charop point above.

Lack of emphasis on system mastery

Fate is, to me, not a game about learning to manipulate the game system. It's a game about the **fiction** (as in, the stuff we're imagining in our heads), not the rules. The rules get out of the way more than anything, and it's hard to have system mastery be important if you're trying to de-emphasize the system.

Attempts to make Fate "crunchy" (that is, to make system mastery a more important thing) to me make games feel less like Fate.

Branches, not gates

Scenes in Fate games to me work best as a series of possible branches. They're not challenges to be overcome. If there's a 95% chance of success at no cost, there's no real point in having a scene.

Focus on opportunity cost

This is a big one to me. Unlike games that focus on system mastery and overcoming challenges, Fate to me works best when opportunity cost is shoved in the players' faces. That's a question that appears over and over in Fate - spending Fate points to buy a victory, success at a cost, accepting Compels - all of these point directly at the idea of "how much do you want this, and what are you willing to give up to get it?"

If a Fate game de-emphasizes this, to me it starts to feel less like Fate. Hacks to Fate that do things like require the pre-spending of Fate Points or the

like feel less-"Fate" to me.

A focus on what's important in the story, not modeling reality

If you think on most fiction, the weapon that a given combatant uses isn't particularly relevant most of the time. The fact that someone uses an axe vs. a sword isn't going to mean that they lose in a scene. Sure, there are special pieces of equipment, but they tend to be just that - special.

To me, a good Fate game approaches its systems in that way - what's actually important, in this genre? Do characters tend to lose fights because they're not armed with bigger weapons or sturdier armor? If not, then that shouldn't be how your game models it, either.

A good example of this is thinking about mecha. How many stats should a mech have, and how much of its combat ability should be based on it instead of its pilot? And that boils down to - 'what story are you telling'? If it's about the pilot, and a good pilot in a weak or mediocre mecha can still be an effective combatant, then the mecha should only have a modifying impact on the pilot's skills, and the story will focus around the pilots. But if the story should focus around the attainment of awesome mecha, then they should have a larger impact. It's not a matter of what's "realistic". It's a matter of "what impact does this have on the game, and what elements do I want to be important in the game?"

Active instead of passive bonuses

A big thing with Fate, to me, is the idea that most bonuses are active - they're the result of things that you **do**. This fits in with the "proactive" part of characters as well. This compares to other games where much of the game is focused on "how many bonuses can I find a way to make apply?" That can be a great type of game - but it ain't (to me) Fate.

Skills tied to results, not actions

Another biggie. In many games, using a skill means you're engaging in a specific task that may have a variable result. In Fate, I see it more as "I'm

trying to accomplish this - do I succeed?" It seems subtle, but it's a pretty important point, and colors how a lot of mechanics get applied.

Bell curve results

Fate uses a randomization scheme that is heavily biased towards "average" results. It doesn't use a flat distribution. How that is specifically achieved, or exactly how biased it is, is somewhat more open - but a flat distribution doesn't feel like Fate to me.

Anyway, those are the main things I can think of, at least for now. I'm sure I'll add more later!

And these are just my opinions. They're not the word of God, and others will absolutely have different lists, and even things that they think I just got totally **wrong**. But, to me, this is kind of the core of what I consider to be "Fate" - and, if you look at it, a good predictor of what games I'll generally say don't feel "Fate-like" to me.

Why the Heck am I Doing This?

Okay, no big reveal (I'm actually working for Evil Hat! Muahahaha) or anything of the sort. But I've put a lot of time into some of these posts, and I'd like to just point out why I'm doing this. I mean, at the end of the day, this is just an RPG, a fun way to kill some time.

I'm a long term gamer. Been playing for over thirty years now, started with Moldvay D&D. I've played a plethora of systems. I've worked with famous industry folks, though I certainly am not a "famous industry folk" myself.

My mindset is pretty fully old-school. Yay, character death, and difficulty, and earning the awesome. If you had asked me a year ago if it would make sense for a character to find a secret door that wasn't on the map, just because they'd rolled well, I'd ask if you were crazy. If you told me a year ago that I'd advocate not killing characters without a discussion, I'd ask you to share your stash. (BTW, I'd still maintain those statements, *for certain types of games!*)

I started Fate with SotC and DFRPG. And... it was a learning curve. There were things I just wasn't getting, and I knew it. But I liked enough of what was going on, and liked enough of Fate (my previous foray into more narrative systems had been Burning Wheel) that I stuck with it. And the biggest issue, over and over again, was the fact that I was unconsciously trying to make Fate act like a more traditional system.

Where were the attributes? Where were the things you put together? How the heck did it make sense to have an aspect **Really Strong**, yet it only came into play on occasion? This is madness!

But I stuck with it. I read the books, I played with folks that got it (Hi, +[Jacob Poss](#)!). I read responses from the gurus on this community (more than I care to name... most of you know who you are!).

At first, it was a few bits here and there that came together that were just awesome. And then, at some point, something clicked. It came together. I **got** it. "Fiction, not physics" became more than a cute catchphrase meaning that fun was more important than realism. I stopped looking for more systems. The airplanes-as-stunts in *Kriegszeppelin Valkyrie* made sense. The importance of the Phase Trio clicked, and it wasn't just party cohesion.

When it all came together, I found a new way to play RPGs. A way that's pretty awesome, and not very much like the D&D I played when I was 10.

Now, don't get me wrong - I still like other ways of playing. I've got no problem with a goold old fashioned dungeon crawl, or a set of tactical set piece encounters with some story/investigation bits between them. I've had a

heck of a lot of fun over the years playing those games, and I'm sure I'll have more in the years to come. I want to run an X-COM game at some point, and it almost certainly won't be in Fate (GURPS and Savage Worlds are the frontrunners atm).

And that's what these posts are about - detailing my realizations, and throwing them out there to maybe help other people that are struggling to come to grips with the same things I came to grips with. So if I post something like, "Fate doesn't have a damage system," don't take that as the prophet on the mount making a proclamation. I'm not into the holy prophet thing, given that the fashion choices are terrible and the life expectancy is generally worse. Instead, take it as me going, "Holy shit! I just realized, this game doesn't have a damage system! It thinks about the results of combat in an almost totally different way! That's crazy cool!"

So that's what these posts are about. Trying to help others look at Fate with a bit of "beginner's mind," and seeing it through eyes not trained by years of gaming in other systems. It's about helping others to find the things that I find awesome in the system. It's not about telling people they're doing things "wrong" - there's no Fate Police ready to knock down doors, the last I checked. If you're having fun, as far as you're concerned, you're doing it right. It's about sharing the things that I've discovered about the system when I stopped trying to shove its square peg into a round hole.

And I'll say, doing that is **tough**. We've got a lot of things in traditional gaming that work, and make for awesome games. In a lot of cases, deviating from those slightly doesn't work, as those games tend to sit on "local maxima" - areas where the decisions made work together in a tight, interlocked way. But I think Fate sits on a very different local maximum than most games, and to find it you've gotta change a lot of assumptions, and be willing to approach it like it was the very first game you've played. I've found it to be worth it, and so I want to share what I've learned to help others find that same awesome.

And if you're interested, come on along for the journey. Share your insights with me, and I'll happily share mine with you. If not, hell, maybe we'll get together and play a game that sits in a different area, and have fun doing that.

Introducing People to Fate

So, this seems to come up a bunch. Figured I'd get my thoughts out, and see what others have to say.

Anyway. Fate does some things differently. Fundamentally, I think that's because it has ended up trying to answer very different questions than typical RPGs do. As such, it can look a bit weird at first for new players. There's a number of concepts that don't mesh particularly well with more 'traditional' or typical RPGs.

So, how to introduce new players?

The first thing I do is talk the system up - specifically its strengths. I point out how the system really allows you to think about **who** your character is, instead of just **what** they are and what they can **do**. I point out how fast it runs, and the great support it has for non-combat options and actions. I also point out that it's a different game, and that it's not a replacement for their favorite game.

Assuming I've suckered^{H^H^H^H^H^H} gotten some people to be willing to try, I set up a game. Before the game, individually if possible, I go over a few things.

First, I talk up the fact that in Fate, the expectation isn't that you'll be given a bunch of encounters, and that you have to overcome them. I point out that failure is normal and expected, and won't mean the end of the game.

So at game time, I actually do go through cooperative setting/character creation. I find this builds investment in the setting, and eases the making a character bit.

Usually, by the end of setting creation (which is pretty quick), I find that the players are pretty excited about the game. That's why I actually do it, BTW. Since setting creation is fun, and isn't where any of the usual stumbling blocks occur, getting players invested in the game and excited before they hit them seems to be really useful for getting them to plow through if they hit a rough patch.

I make sure that when creating characters, it's done as a group - the person whose character is being made drives his part of that, of course, but everyone is paying attention and contributing.

Helping explain aspects a bit at this point helps, as well as coming up with suggestions. Since we're still focused on the "story bits" at this point, it seems to work okay. I can drive them towards slightly more useful aspects with my knowledge without having to knowledge dump them.

The usual explanation of assets I like to give is something like this: "Take Han Solo at the end of Star Wars. Let's say that there's some stories written about him between then and the beginning of Empire. What things would those stories have to include to really be 'Han Solo stories'?" Usually the answer will be things like the Falcon, Chewie, his debt to Jabba, him being a dashing/cocky guy, *etc.* And those are all things I'd consider to be his aspects.

While the cooperative, one-at-a-time character creation may seem like it would be slow, in practice I find that it actually works a **lot** faster. I think the collaboration and interest level, combined with attention from someone that knows the game keeps things moving at a somewhat better clip. Also, for the "guest star" phases, it seems to help because the players will already be somewhat familiar with the stories they're guest-starring in.

Skills are pretty easy, but I usually kind of gloss over stunts a bit, and just leave blanks. I may help them think of stunts that would work with their character, but I've found this to be the thing that can take the most time. Instead, I'll suggest stunts during play as they become available, and point out beforehand that this is what we'll be doing.

Okay, so during play I make sure I stick with the model of TV/Movie/Book. All examples I use to explain rules will either be from one of those, or framed as being in one. I'll make references to "camera shots" and stuff like that - even do cutaways or "title sequences" as appropriate. To me, I find the key here is being consistent in framing things this way, to help overcome some of the "simulationist" tendencies that most new players (myself included) have.

Also, during play I try to keep in mind what **I** would do if I was running that PC, and offer suggestions. I also keep an emphasis on "okay, but what do you **do**" whenever players start focusing more on the numbers than the game.

One thing that I've seen is kind of difficult is for players to be proactive and try to actually drive things. The usual mode I've seen for players is to kind of passively investigate. So I will also frequently ask "Okay, what are you trying to get out of this? Imagine the best possible success for this - what does it look like?" Strangely, I think the idea that players can actually **succeed** at that level, and get what they want, is a novel concept in many cases.

Almost certainly a physical Conflict (fight) will come up, if for no other reason than in most RPGs it's expected, and so I don't mind meeting that expectation. This is one of the other big points for teaching people Fate, I find.

The key here is to get them thinking in terms of good Fate strategy - targeting weaknesses, using Create Advantage, and all of the other stuff. Again, I find it useful to go back to movies/TV/books. I've seen a number of

people new to Fate (as in, almost everyone) just try to go head-to-head with a tough opponent, when they're not combat optimized - bad move. Either before the Conflict, or within a round or so, I'll call a quick timeout, and explain how it works, and how Create Advantage can really do wonders for your effectiveness, rather than trying to throw your 2 Fight against your opponent's 6.

I'll also make sure they know about conceding, and will point out that they can offer to do so at any time. I'll emphasize that how long they stay in is really more about how much they're willing to risk to get what the Conflict is about, and reiterate that it's expected to lose on occasion. In many cases, this first fight will be deliberately designed to be lost/conceded. I'll often frame it as an inciting incident, so that it serves as them discovering the issue at hand.

Anyway, that's my general outline. It's generally worked well, and when it hasn't I can pretty effectively point to one of the things I've listed above that I **haven't** done - this procedure is the result of mistakes and the lessons learned from them.

One thing that I **don't** do is try to 'ease' the learning of Fate by making it more like other games. I know that's pretty common, but I haven't really seen any value in it, or any need for it. I find it usually works very well to just say "Yes, this is different. Here's why, and here's what it gets you. So let's try it out." For those things that "don't match", I think you have to do one or the other - either make it enough like what the expectation is that it doesn't trigger the reaction, or call it out so that it is in the conscious mind of everyone, which also bypasses that kind of unconscious reaction.

So - what does everyone else do? Any tips or tricks? Experiences? Stories where it's gone amazingly well? Horror stories?

Fiction First, Fiction-Rules Interaction, and Nonsensical Results

So, this is just a collection on my thoughts on this subject, as I think it's often one of the most overlooked, often by me. Some of this stuff may be subtle or just pedantic. So, either bear with me, or call me an idiot. It's all good.

"Fiction First" is the Golden Rule of Fate. To understand it, we have to define "fiction".

"Fiction", to me, is just the crap we're imagining in our heads. When we forget about our numbers, and let our imagination take over the scene, **that's** the "fiction". It's not a statement of some kind of book-writing agenda, or talking about some kind of predetermined plot. It's what happens when we let our imaginations take over the game, instead of focusing on the dice and character sheets.

And that's pretty damn powerful. I don't know about anybody else, but that's the reason I play RPGs. Not for the number crunching, but for that sense of being "in" the world, and seeing what happens. That's the good stuff - all the other stuff is just what helps us get there.

So, what does "fiction first" mean, at least to me? It means that character actions should start with the "fiction", and be described in terms of the "fiction". Then, and only then should they be interpreted into mechanics.

This means that in general, players shouldn't start with "I Attack/Overcome/Create". If you hear a ton of game jargon in terms of what's going on, it's time to place more emphasis on the "fiction", and less on the rules. Paint a picture. Make sure everybody is "seeing" the same thing in their mind. Have them say what their **character** does, not what the collection of numbers on the page suggest is the optimal course of action.

From that, figure out what else is involved in this action. Who is opposing it? How difficult is it?

Once we've figured this out, then we can start figuring out how we're going to resolve the action. Is it an Attack? An Overcome? A Create Advantage? Is there passive opposition, and if so, at what level? Then we roll the dice, go through any invocation 'bidding', and finally get a resolution.

And here we get to the next point. Fate doesn't actually tell you what happens. The dice never tell you what actually occurs - at least not the way they do in GURPS, where the system will tell you "you hit the orc in the arm, for x amount of damage, and have disabled the arm". Instead, they place **constraints** on the narration.

If you Attack an opponent with a sword, and tie, you get a Boost. Great. What does that mean? It's nothing concrete, that's for sure, at least not like it would be in GURPS. We have to narrate what happens, but what does happen?

Well, Fate doesn't tell us. What it **does** tell us is the general parameters of the narration. We know that no stress has been inflicted, so that the target isn't really inherently closer to being Taken Out. We know they haven't taken any Consequences, so nothing significant happens to them. We do know that they're placed at a temporary disadvantage, though, and the narration has to incorporate that... **how** we do that is up to us, though.

For a gritty game, it could be that the shock of parrying the sword made them go slightly numb in that hand, but nothing that won't get shaken off. Or they could be knocked back by the force of the blow. For a swashbuckling game, maybe their clothes get ripped causing them to see red for a few seconds. In a more cinematic game, maybe they take a flesh wound that causes them to recoil.

Wait.. What? How can a Boost actually be a hit that causes damage? We didn't inflict Stress!

Well.... yeah. But Stress isn't damage - it's a pacing measure, a way of determining how close someone is to being Taken Out. And succeeding on an Attack doesn't mean you **hit**, and tying, or even losing, on the Attack doesn't mean you don't hit (though that's usually a good bet). Again, Fate doesn't tell you **what** happens, it just places **constraints** on the narration. And since Stress is really a measure of how close you are to being Taken Out, so long as the narration of the resolution is consistent with that, you're fine. You don't need to **hit** someone to get them to be closer to being Taken Out, and just because you hit someone doesn't mean that they **are** closer to being Taken Out.

So we narrate the results, and get on with the game. This gives an overall flow that looks something like this:

- 1) Describe scene in terms of "the fiction"
- 2) Determine character's action in the "fiction"
- 3) Determine opposition
- 4) Determine how to apply rules
- 5) Resolve action mechanically
- 6) Get constraints on resolution from the mechanics
- 7) Narrate the resolution within the given constraints

Okay, so in my mind this clears up a few common questions/concerns that frequently come up about Fate, especially with more 'transitioning' players. You know, like me.

First, if you can use Create Advantage to create an arbitrary aspect, why can't you just use it to come up with some blatantly overpowered thing that wins the scenario?

So, this is answered by the fact that we're skipping the first five steps of the resolution process! If the proposed action doesn't make sense in the fiction, you'll never get past step two. And step four definitely stops it, as there's no real way to apply the rules to an impossible action.

If we're playing a gritty military game, and someone says that they want to flap their arms and fly to the top of a guard tower... that just doesn't happen. Neither does making a bomb out of sticks and mud. To even get to the point where we roll dice, the action has to be accepted as **plausible**, even if unlikely.

Secondly, I've heard a bunch of stuff about stress and damage and taking large hits and whatnot. The key here is that stress isn't tangible or concrete. It just places constraints on the narrative. If you "get hit" with a rocket launcher (aka, the Attack succeeded), and take a single point of stress, that doesn't mean that the rocket hit you full on the chest and you brushed it off.

What it means is you take a point of stress. One point. And that the narration of what happens as part of the rocket launcher attack needs to be consistent with that. Since getting hit by a rocket launcher means, logically, that you're turned into the consistency of chunky salsa, then clearly you didn't actually get "hit" by the rocket launcher. Maybe you twisted your ankle dodging. Maybe you got hit by some kicked up rocks. Maybe you were mostly covered, but got singed a bit.

But at any rate, Fate can't give you an illogical outcome, because **it doesn't give you an outcome**. For it to give you an illogical outcome, there would need to be no possible scenario in which that outcome made sense... and there are plenty of ways to justify taking a single point of stress as the outcome of a rocket launcher being shot at you.

The third thing I see is the various forms of shooting someone in the head. This even shows up in the main Fate Core book! One of the sample characters (I forget which) drops an important NPC with a single hit from their sword. What about stress! What about consequences!

Well, what about them? If a trained warrior hits an unarmed, unexpected non-combatant with a sword, what do you **think** is going to happen? They're going to get pretty well murderified.

This isn't really a Conflict, so stress isn't even relevant (stress is a **Conflict** pacing mechanic, not an inherent property of characters). The missed step in the resolution outline above is four - determining how to apply the rules to resolve the action. The core error here is really in assuming that every time

someone swings a sword (or shoots a gun), it's a Conflict, and so we need to use the Conflict pacing mechanism and rules and all that jazz.

But we don't. We don't skip step four! We should always think about what the right way to resolve an action is, even if just for a millisecond. And most importantly, that resolution mechanic is dependent on a few things:

- 1) The action being performed
- 2) The intended result
- 3) The specific situation
- 4) The larger "goal" of the scene

In many systems, resolution is dependent **only** on the first of these. In Fate, though, that's not the case. Pushing someone can be an Attack (attempting to push them off a cliff), or it can be Create Advantage (knocking them down or off balance), or it can be an Overcome (moving them out of an advantageous position).

Shooting someone doesn't mean it's an Attack - Attack is generally a Conflict action. If the scene is better modeled as a Challenge or Contest, or even just a simple Overcome, an Attack may not be necessary. Heck, a sniper shooting someone in the head **should** be able to take out his target with one shot - something that's not really possible against non-mooks using default stress/consequences. So... maybe that means that a 'typical' sniping situation (unaware target, etc.) isn't a Conflict - which would make sense since the target isn't providing active opposition, and isn't trying to hurt the sniper (yet!).

So... that's what "fiction first" means to me. It means that the fiction drives the rules. It's called the "Golden Rule" of Fate for a reason, and that reason is that following that rules settles an absolute ton of other potential problems or questions.

As well as being a hell of a lot more fun.

What Collaborative Setting Creation Means To Me

Okay, so, collaborative setting creation seems to be one of those weird things for people new to more narrative games, and it was a bit of a hurdle for me. What exactly does the GM have power over? Does that mean that the players can just determine whatever they want? Does the GM do no worldbuilding? If the players can just declare anything they want, then doesn't the game just devolve into sitting around and telling a story?

I think the best way I can explain my thoughts on this is to give you a few examples of what I think it means. As always, this is my opinion, and others will almost certainly disagree :) My examples will be three versions of a single pitch - government agents investigating supernatural threats - and how this changes according to the three groups it's run with. Any similarity to anything "real" is as utterly unintended as any similarity Nanoc the IP-Friendly Barbarian has to any other character.

Some of this will be slightly not-strictly-according-to-the-rules for the sake of the examples.

Group one

GM: "Okay, so government agents investigating the supernatural. What do you guys like for a threat? Kind of at the looming threat level?"

P1: "Aliens. I like aliens."

P2: "Cool! But, how about a conspiracy? Like, the aliens are working with the government?"

GM: "I dig it. So you guys are what, then, FBI?"

P1: "Yeah, that sounds cool. Some interesting possibilities for the government investigating itself and politics in there."

GM: "Okay, any ideas on characters? I'd like to keep the players pretty normal - I don't want this to be a superhero game."

P1: "Okay, I can do normal. Since we're doing aliens, how about if I'm an investigator obsessed with the supernatural, since my sister was abducted when I was a kid?"

GM: "I like it."

P2: "Good stuff... as a counter, why don't I play a character that's more skeptical? That'll make some good tension between the two?"

GM: "Awesome. I'll work on some details, and we'll get to playing."

Group Two

GM: "Okay, so government agents investigating the supernatural. What do you guys like for a threat? Kind of at the looming threat level?"

P1: "Hrm. How about something like an alternate dimension?"

P2: "Yeah, there could be something like a war looming, only we're unaware of it."

P3: "That's... pretty cool. Though maybe there should be something else, some kind of group that's kind of... I don't know, dimensional cops or something."

GM: "Good stuff. Okay, any character ideas?"

P1: "Can I be a government agent? Maybe psychic?"

GM: "I'd like to keep this pretty much with normal people. I guess psychic is okay, but is it okay if it's more 'plot-psychic', as in it's not a generally useful skill?"

P1: "Sure, that works. It's not relevant until it is."

P2: "I want to be a mad scientist, how's that?"

P1: "Hey, you can have experimented on me when I was a kid, and that's why I'm sorta psychic!"

P2: "Awesome. I love it."

GM: "Cool. P3?"

P3: "We're doing this dimension thing, right? How about if I'm someone from this other dimension?"

GM: "Mmm, I kinda want to keep the other dimension thing unknown to the characters at the start."

P3: "That's fine, maybe I just don't know it. Maybe I was dragged over here when I was a kid."

P2: "... maybe by your friendly neighborhood mad scientist?"

P3: "I love it. But why?"

P2: "Maybe you're the alternate version of my dead son?"

GM: "Oh, wow. I can't see that blowing up in anyone's faces. But does that mean that everyone has an alternate version?"

P1: "Yeah, I think it would."

GM: "That could get very cool if people start crossing dimensions. Love it. Okay, I'll set it up, see you guys next week."

Group Three

GM: "Okay, so government agents investigating the supernatural. What do you guys like for a threat? Kind of at the looming threat level?"

P1: "I really like the idea that myths are based on some kind of reality, even if it's heavily distorted. Can we do something like that."

GM: "Sure. What kind of myths?"

P2: "I dunno, most of the old myths are overdone."

P3: "How about fairy tales? Except we've drastically misinterpreted them."

GM: "That... could be cool. So, what are you guys thinking? FBI for you guys?"

P1: "Mmmmm... how about something more low-scale at first, to kind of make the larger conflict seem bigger. Maybe local cops?"

P2: "Yeah, I like it. And maybe the fairy-tale creatures are trying to rise to prominence like they used to be."

P3: "Oh, that's awesome. But if we're going with misinterpreted fairy tales, I get to be the big bad wolf."

GM: "Cute."

P3: "No, really! Except I'm like, reformed, and a vegetarian."

P1: "That's... kind of awesome."

GM: "I really want to keep this more about regular people, not superheroes..."

P3: "That's fine. Maybe I'm a bit tougher than most people, but that'd really be about it... I figure most of these supernatural folks are just kinda hanging out living regular lives anyway, so I don't really need anything super-awesome."

GM: "Yeah, I can see that working."

P1: "Okay, so these are fairy tales, right? How about if the fairy tales were written down originally as kind of a warning about the supernatural? And then I'm one of the descendants of this group that fought against them?"

GM: "I like it. P2?"

P2: "Well, you want to keep this grounded, and we've already got the big bad wolf and a monster hunter, so why don't I just be a regular cop? That'll provide at least some grounding back in reality. Plus, I think getting exposed to this stuff will lead to some cool character development."

GM: "That's awesome. I'll get some stuff planned, and see you guys next week."

So, in each case, the players have modified the setting, and the story of the games will end up revolving around them - it wouldn't really work with other characters. But, the GM still has a huge amount of responsibility over the game - the players have helped set the overall world, as well as the general themes of the game, but the individual events and scenarios still are well within the realm of what the GM does, even if they're often based on character aspects.

Focus on the Table

Yeah, I know these aren't anywhere **near** daily, but it's still the thought for **this** day, so that counts, right??

This post
<https://plus.google.com/u/0/110592364350710312709/posts/Ye6LSw8Wwhw>
got me thinking about one of the things that I find different about how I approach Fate.

As brief background, the majority of my adult life has been spent making video games in various capacities. One of the high gurus of the field is Sid Meier, though he for some reason gets less credit than many of the "visionaries". Sid Meier has an incredible, almost perfect track record of making awesome games, with very few missteps. (Why he gets less "fame" is perhaps a topic for another day).

There's a quote that's attributed to Sid Meier. It may be misattributed, but I think it's valid anyway. The quote is: "There are three types of games. There's games where the designer is having all of the fun. There's games where the computer is having all of the fun. And there's games where the player is having all of the fun." And whether or not Sid said this, I think it's an incredibly true quote.

And it's applicable to RPGs. RPGs are famous for having incredibly intricate systems. But who is having the fun with those?

Let's take a simple example, and make a game that's a very basic combat game. Barely an RPG, if at all. In this game, the only action is to attack. Now, let's say that there are two versions of this game. In one, you just roll a d6 to determine damage on an attack. In the other, you add in all kinds of factors about the situation, the characters involved, the weapons and armor, and detail out every aspect of the blow - the angle of blow, exactly how it penetrated armor, etc... and end up with damage between one and six.

Who is having the fun in the second version? Assuming that the player has little control over the factors that go into the simulation, is the second game any different from a player perspective, except for the die rolling? (I'll acknowledge that this game may be fun as a "deck-building" type game, where manipulating those statistics is the point, but that's not the focus of this post).

So, what happened? The designer of this game focused on making an accurate simulation (and I'm not saying that simulations are bad, btw, so let's avoid the GNS reactions, mkay?). In Sid's language, he made a game where the computer is having all of the fun.

What decisions would we make with this game if we were focused on the **player** having the fun? That's going to vary greatly based on what any individual thinks is fun (and that's **definitely** a topic for another day), but I think the most obvious thing that stands out is that having exactly one thing to do - "attack" - on any turn isn't a very interesting game. Hell, I don't even know if it **is** a game in any real sense.

Personally, I'd focus on the "chess-game" of combat. I'd give the player various moves, and figure out how those moves worked. Maybe some kind of double-blind mechanic to add uncertainty. I'd use a bit of Game Theory (the mathy kind) to figure out something approaching an appropriate payout structure, and use the minimum math possible to get the interactions at the table to work out the way I want to.

Okay, so what does this have to do with Fate? I've written quite a few words, and exactly zero of them have had anything to do with dice that have +s and -s on them.

One of the things about Fate as a core/generic system is that it's pretty common that it needs some level of tweaking to work with a particular genre or setting.

And that's where I get to the real point here - how and why do you tweak/add? What's the priority? How do you know what to do?

The common impulse in these cases, built by many years of gaming, is to think of the game as some kind of a reality simulator, and come up with some kind of model for how these parts work together. And that may be useful.

But what's really important is what happens at the table. How the players interact with the system, the fiction, and each other. And that's what this is really about.

If you ask "how do I do cybernetics in Fate?" that's a great question. It's also an example I come back to time and time again, so there's that.

So, how do we start? We can hypothesize that there's some kind of humanity stress track. We can start looking at adding or removing consequences or the like. These seem like pretty reasonable places to start, but...

These are all systems questions. These are all about building a model, and they haven't explicitly looked at things from the player side at all. There may be some kind of implicit idea of how players will interact with them, but maybe that should be the starting point?

So, what does cybernetic enhancement usually do? Well, it makes you "better," for one - but, so does working out, so I don't know if we need to really increase the overall cap on skills for that. And besides, bigger numbers aren't super interesting.

The usual thing we see with cybernetics is that there's some kind of loss of empathy, especially as people become more enhanced. Also, they may fail. On a more positive note, given that they're machine, they may allow people to surpass human limits in some areas.

These all seem very highly story-centric so far. The negatives seem very much like compels, and the positive seems like it could be handled perfectly fine with an invoke. If we wanted it to be more persistent, we could add in a stunt.

But the key point here isn't "go systems lite" - even though with Fate you often can. Make as heavy of a system as you need to make. The question is in defining how heavy of a system you need to make.

As a software developer, I believe in something called Test Driven Development. It's horribly misnamed. The basic idea of TDD (as it's called) is a simple loop:

- 1) Define what "working" looks like
- 2) Make it work
- 3) Clean it up to make it nice

The biggest key here is the first step. It seems obvious, but it's often not followed in many disciplines. If you can't define what "success" looks like, then how will you know if your work is successful or complete?

And when we do systems changes, we usually have some idea of what "success" looks like, even if it's very implicit. And for me, the implicit idea of success has generally been based on something like "gives realistic results".

Instead of that, I've learned now to look at success in terms of "what do the players do at the table?" The math is mostly irrelevant, so long as the interactions are there. And by doing this, I've started to focus on making games that are fun for the **player**, and not the **system**.

The funny thing about this is that when you start thinking in terms of the players, a lot of times it turns out you need less system than you thought. One of the most complex, deep games on the planet (Go) has rules that can be described in... less than a page, probably. I generally teach people the **rules** in about five minutes.

I've focused so far in this post on modifying the game - and that's because this is the place where this tends to show up the worst. But it's a principle that's useful whenever thinking about RPGs, especially as a GM. Who is this fun for?

Is it fun because you get to show off your incredible creativity? Think long and hard about the role of the players - they shouldn't be an audience (especially in Fate).

Is it fun because it's an intricate mathematical simulation that produces great results? Again, think of it from the player perspective.

Because at the end of the day, the game is about the players (including the GM, of course). If they're not having fun, there's no game. It doesn't matter if the system has fun. And the GM/designer needs to have fun, of course, but not at the expense of the players.

Pacing Mechanisms in Fate

So, this is something I've wanted to write for a while, but haven't gotten around to. Until today.

What's a pacing mechanism?

One of the things I see some confusion about in Fate are the various pacing mechanisms available - Conflicts, Contests, and Challenges, or as I like to call them, the 3 Cs.

So, I call them all pacing mechanisms. What the heck do I even mean by that? That seems to imply that they're all related to each other, but they're clearly not, right??

Okay, so time for Rob to get pedantic (like that's new). We roll dice in Fate to answer a question. **Technically**, if we wanted to, we could answer any question, no matter how big or small, with a single die roll - probably an Overcome.

Hell, if we were running Star Wars as a Fate game, we could do the entire game as a single Overcome roll against the Empire! But... what fun would that be?

And fundamentally, that's the point of pacing mechanisms. They're nothing more, and nothing less, than a tool to make the resolution of a single question take longer than one roll of the dice/action resolution.

(And if you hear me refer to stress as a pacing mechanism, that's why - stress determines, to a great extent, how long a Conflict will last).

But why call them pacing mechanisms? For instance, aren't Contests really chases? Isn't that what they model?

Nope. Contests don't "model" anything. They just drag things out, and provide an ending condition. Sure, their mechanics map reasonably well to how you'd model a chase, but that doesn't mean that they actually model chases. In general, you're best off if you use the pacing mechanisms **as** pacing mechanisms, and leave the modeling to the narrative level. Roll the dice, figure out the results, and then narrate the results in a way that makes it clear that one side or the other is getting closer to achieving their goal. In Fate, the "fiction", the shared imagination and view of what's going on, informs the mechanics rather than the other way around.

So, which one of these do you use? This seems to be a common question, and one that I think has a pretty simple answer, if you look at the question

from a slightly different way.

Much like Attack vs. Overcome isn't based on what you're doing, but rather whether you're trying to Take Out your opponent, which pacing mechanism you choose isn't determined by the actions that are being undertaken, primarily. It's determined by the nature of the opposition.

Challenges

I'll start with Challenges, since they have the generally easiest criteria. Use a Challenge when you don't have active opposition over the entire Challenge. This could mean that the opposition is the environment (barring Fight Fire and the like). This could mean that the opposition is unaware and inactive (see the Contest section for what I mean by that). This could mean that you **do** have active opposition, but only for part of the Challenge (in which case you can either model that as an Overcome, or as a sub-Conflict/Contest as appropriate).

Zird warding off the zombies meets these criteria. The zombies are (mostly) a passive, environmental challenge, and at any rate he's really barring the door to them. Convincing the townspeople is arguably active opposition... but they're not interfering with the majority of the challenge, and so is an Overcome. Casting the ritual is simply environmental, and is an Overcome.

Now, part of a Challenge **may** involve active opposition - such as the villagers being convinced in the Zird example. In that case, you can either treat it as a simple Overcome within the Challenge (remember, that all pacing mechanisms are basically stand-ins for a single resolution), or you can expand it out further into an inner Conflict/Contest if appropriate.

But what if you have active opposition - some individual or party that is directly opposing the question that you're trying to answer? That leaves Conflicts and Contests, which is where a lot of questions seem to come up.

Conflicts

If your opposition is active, and direct, you use a Conflict. By direct, I mean that the goal of both parties is to get the other to back down in some way - either by getting knocked out and killed, by surrendering, by fleeing, *etc.* For a Conflict, the two things should be true:

1) Both sides are committed to getting the other side to back down

2) The "question" of the conflict is either:

a) whether a particular side will back down in some way

b) something that the winner can accomplish if the opposition isn't there

So if you're trying to capture some bad guys (or the other way around), that **could** be a Conflict, so long as both sides are exchanging blows (by choice or because no other option exists). If you're trying to get past guards to defuse a bomb, that's a Conflict, up until the guards run off to save their hides, or you do.

Contests

If your opposition is active and **indirect**, choose a Contest.

By indirect, I mean simply that both sides aren't engaged in mutual annihilation. The obvious cases would be races, or a chase. It could be trying to capture someone, so long as they're trying to evade capture. It could even be fleeing from a shooter (where the question becomes "Can I make it to cover before I get shot/killed?"). But the key here is that there are still two or more **active** participants/sides - you generally don't use a Contest if one side is unaware.

Aside: You might choose a Contest with an unaware side, if that side is actively doing something that would bring the Contest to a close - a sorcerer opening a gate to an evil realm, for instance, might be in a contest with the adventurers trying to make it to his sanctum to interrupt the spell, even if the sorcerer is unaware of their presence. The real key here is the **active** bit.

In general, any time you can phrase the question you're answering as "do I <my desired goal> before they <their desired goal>" is a Contest, unless both of the desired goals are "beat up the other guy".

Choosing Based On Context

So that's the basic way that I divide up the pacing mechanisms. And it's interesting, because some high-level actions may fall under any of the three pacing mechanisms, based on the context of the action.

As an example, let's say you're a sniper, and what to shoot someone in the head. Is that a Challenge? Is it a Contest? Is it a Conflict?

If the target is unaware of what you're doing, and there's no enemy awareness of your presence, it's a challenge - there's no active opposition, so there's no "other side". There's certainly some **passive** opposition that must be overcome in some way or another, but you're not dealing with an active opponent.

If the target is unaware, but there's a patrol in the area that's hunting you down, then it's a Contest - "do I shoot my target before the enemy patrol finds me" definitely falls into the Contest template described above.

If you're in the middle of a firefight, and trying to snipe one of your opponents, then it's a Conflict, pretty clearly.

Last Thoughts

These three pacing mechanisms do a pretty good job of covering just about all situations. Some might require a bit of coercing to get into place, but they're all basically workable. I don't know that I'd mix them - shooting someone that's running to me seems mostly like a Contest, so I don't know that I'd necessarily mix Stress/Consequences into that. And again, they don't really "model" anything. They're about **pacing**, not **modeling**.

And obviously there's other ways to handle pacing besides these three. If there's something that really bugs you, come up with another mechanism to handle it! But I'd keep the general idea of these being **pacing** mechanisms intact, and keep the modeling in the narrative.

Calibration - the Dial Without a Dial

Oooh, how zen.

A common thing that I see discussed in Fate is how to model super-strength or the like. Which is a great question. If +4 Athletics is a super-athletic person, and a +5 or +6 is an Olympic quality gymnast, then how do you model something even more athletic than that? Maybe peak skill should be a dial?

(And as soon as I said dial, you probably looked at the title and went, "Oh, Rob, you think you're so clever." Well, ya got me.)

One of the things that I look at in Fate Core is that the mechanics are really solid for a lot of scenarios out of the box. And that skills don't represent an objective measure of training, but are rather the ability to influence a scene in a particular way. These seem like relatively contradictory things, but come together in the idea of "calibration".

In Fate Core, I don't think that +4 Athletics means "very athletic person". I don't think that +5 or +6 means "Olympic gymnast." I think that +4 means "the most Athletic that a starting character can be." No more, no less.

The meaning of this will, of course, vary from setting to setting. If you're doing a Zero-Dark-Thirty style game, +4 will mean a highly trained, extremely strong, professional soldier, at or near the bounds of human ability. +0 means the baseline capabilities of a professional soldier, below which you'd be drummed out of the service.

Now, if you're doing a game about normal people in extraordinary circumstances, the calibration is going to be a bit different - +0 probably means a more or less average person, while that +4 may be calibrated slightly beneath the "+4" in the previous example (who would be likely closer to a +5 in the "everyday people" game).

And if you're running supers? Superman is probably a +5, and a normal human being would be lucky to hit +1.

The beauty of this is that then all of the differences can be handled with narration, while the core math doesn't even get tweaked. Which is a **great** thing - the core math works great, and modifications to it are inherently more risky than simply modifying your narration appropriately!

I'll admit, of course, that there are circumstances where this doesn't work. If you want one skill to have a higher scene influence than another, for instance, or where you want the difference in capability between the peak and the base to be higher. In practice, though, I think those circumstances are

relatively rare, and should probably be the result of playtesting. You just don't put a +5 skill vs. a +0 with any hope of success anyway.

Damage is another thing that can benefit from calibration. The "gritty" question keeps coming up, and I see lots of number-based ways to handle grittiness. And those can work, but may not be necessary.

Stress and consequences, to me, are about pacing and "aftermath". They're not about damage or realism or grittiness. They're just about how long fights last, and what carries with you afterwards.

So let's say that with default Fate rules, you take a three stress hit from a sword. You mark off your third stress box (moving you closer to being Taken Out) and narrate this as taking a nasty cut across the chest.

Now, we want to have a grittier game. One where a nasty cut across the chest may well be fatal, and taking one probably means that you're pretty messed up. So, we can do this by dropping the stress track to one, and making consequences only worth -1/-2/-3. Now, that's a moderate consequence and your only stress box filled in! Grittier!

It also makes fights shorter. Which **may** be what you're going for, but isn't necessarily tied to grittiness. A gritty fight might be two guys fighting each other for minutes, slowly wearing each other down, small nicks and bruises adding up as they desperately struggle. That certainly *sounds* gritty, anyway. And it's not necessarily short.

So, how do we model a gritty fight in Fate, **without** changing any of the dials? Again, you could change dials as well, but I think it's interesting to see what happens if we **don't** change those dials.

Okay, so we take a three-stress hit. What does this mean? Well, mechanically, it means two things: We're somewhat closer to being Taken Out, and there are no long lasting effects from this hit.

So if we're going for "gritty", clearly this doesn't mean we took a nasty slice across the chest. It could mean lots of things though. Some things it might mean:

- * We've been forced out of position and are "on our heels"
- * We've taken a parry poorly, causing our hand to sting but no lasting damage
- * We had to jump out of the way to dodge, causing no injury, but making us get a bit more winded.

But what would a nasty gash to the chest be, then? Well, probably it would be Taken Out. Pain, muscle damage, blood loss and shock would probably mean that a single serious blow means "game over".

We can do the same thing with consequences. What **does** a -2 consequence mean?

Well, mechanically, it means that the person that delivered it gets a free invoke, it will likely go away shortly after the fight, and that you're that much closer to being Taken Out.

What that means, narratively, has to match the feel of the game. For a "cinematic" game, that may mean a cut to the arm, or something like that. For a "gritty" game, it may simply mean that you've lightly twisted an ankle, got a bit of "dead arm" from a hit that your armor soaked up, or the like.

"But wait", you may be saying. "The descriptions of a lot of those don't sound like hits at all!"

And? The dice dictate the mechanical results of the action. A "hit" or a "miss" is a narrative explanation of that mechanical effect. The dice don't dictate narration - they just provide an end result that you narrate **to**. "Does three stress" is a purely system-level statement. How that translates into narrative is up to you - and should vary based on the type of feel you're going for.

What this ends up meaning is that, to create a grittier feel, you paradoxically narrate effects of hits as being **weaker**, not greater. A three stress hit becomes getting knocked out of position. A minor consequence is getting winded, or a minor laceration from shrapnel. A severe consequence is a mild cut rather than a severe gash. And being Taken Out means you suffered a single hard blow, not half a dozen!

Here's an example of how **the same fight** may play out in both "cinematic" and "gritty" style. The same mechanical effects will be used in both situations!

Alfred hits Bob for three stress: "Alfred strikes at Bob, leaving a nasty cut across his chest. Blood drips down as Bob begins his counterattack".

Bob hits Alfred for four stress, Alfred takes 2 and a minor consequence: "Bob's wicked counterattack catches Alfred off-guard, cutting him across the arm. The cut looks deep, but Alfred's not out of the fight yet."

Alfred hits Bob for five stress, Bob takes a Severe consequence and one stress: "Alfred continues his furious assault at Bob, laying a nasty strike to the leg. The cut doesn't look quite to the bone, but it's pretty severe".

... *etc.* Compare to:

Alfred hits Bob for three stress: "Alfred strikes at Bob. Bob's not ready for the sudden strike, so he stumbles and falls as he barely manages to parry in time."

Bob hits Alfred for four stress, Alfred takes 2 and a minor consequence: "Alfred presses too hastily, and Bob lashes up from his off-balance position. Bob manages to get his blade down in time, but it looks like his hand is going to be sore from taken the impact poorly."

Alfred hits Bob for five stress, Bob takes a Severe consequence and one stress: "Nursing his injured hand, Alfred kicks at Bob and sprawls him out. Bob gasps in pain, it feels like he may have a fractured rib."

Same mechanics. Very different feel, based upon narration and calibration.

Conflicts (as well as Contests and Challenges) as campaign/scenario-level pacing structures.

Okay, so one of the things I've been brewing in the back of my head is some way to put some kind of larger structure into a Fate campaign - the idea is pretty much directly stolen from Burning Empires (and, to a lesser degree, Mouse Guard). There's something just kind of satisfying to me about the idea. It also fits in with my idea of fractal challenges (see: <https://plus.google.com/108546067488075210468/posts/87wrm6yrdWx>). I've just finally got enough of my head wrapped around it to share it a bit more.

Just to note: I don't **know** that this is a good idea. It could be a terrible idea. This is just my initial thought on how to implement it.

The basic idea is that, ultimately, the entire plot of a game (at a given level) can be viewed as a single Overcome roll. But that's not particularly narratively interesting, so we employ a pacing mechanism to drive more detail into the game and make it last longer. Each "turn" in the pacing mechanism employed (be it Challenge, Conflict, or Contest) can in turn be turned into another Challenge/Conflict/Contest, and so on and so forth.

For an initial pass, and because I like the symmetry, I'm going to presume that the pacing mechanisms work the same on all levels. I don't know if that's the right solution, but I think it's a good starting place, and as I said the symmetry pleases me.

To generate one of these pacing mechanisms, we create appropriate "side" characters representing the factions involved. We give them skills appropriate to the side and representing their ability to influence the world. We also give the whole situation appropriate aspects.

Note that the skills probably do **not** match in any way to the character skill list!

Let's assume a Conflict. Now, on each "turn", each side gets to make a move, just like a "normal" Conflict. If the move is made in such a way that it can't be framed as a scene involving the PCs, it's just rolled.

However, if it **can** be framed as a scene involving the PCs (and the effort should be made to do so!), we "drill down" into the fractal by designing the scene.

We come up with goals for each side of the scene, and an idea of what pacing mechanism the scene uses. If the scene is an Overcome or a Create Advantage, we define what "success with style" means. If it's an Attack, we define what can be done in the scene, and how much stress it's worth.

Then, the scene is played out. The results translate up to the "higher level" Conflict just like if it were a single roll - if an Overcome is successful, it removes an Aspect. If a Create Advantage move is successful, a new aspect is generated. An Attack deals stress and (possibly) Consequences.

Then, we move to the next side's turn, until the higher-level conflict is finalized in some way.

So, the basic flowchart would look something like this:

-

- 1) Set up the Conflict
 - a) Make sides, with appropriate skills and aspects and stress tracks
 - b) Create situational aspects describing the scene
 - c) Make zones, if necessary?
- 2) Decide who goes first by some manner
- 3) The side whose turn it is gets to declare a normal Conflict action. This should still be narrative rather than simply "I attack"
- 4) If this cannot be framed as a scene involving the PCs, simply roll as normal.
- 5) If this **can** be framed as a scene, create the scene:
 - a) Give appropriate NPCs/resistance per the relative skills of the sides
 - b) If aspects are invoked, modify appropriately
 - c) Define success criteria, and stress values if this is an Attack
- 6) Play the scene out
- 7) Using the criteria set in step 5, transfer stress/aspect creation/destruction/consequences to the "upper" conflict.
- 8) Move to the next side and go to Step 4.

-

So, I absolutely hate mechanics without examples, so here's the example. This is pretty much the same example as the last time I mentioned this in a comment.

The Rebel Coalition is fighting off the Imperions! To destroy the Doom Base, they first need to deactivate its shield generator on the forest moon of Rodne.

The rebels just have a few units in comparison to the Imperions. The Imperions have a lot more hardware and men (though it's a relatively small base), but they have the disadvantage of being in a known location and pretty much unaware of the rebel presence. So we'll model that out:

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Rebels:
Raid: +2
Recon: +3
Sneak: +4

-

Imperions:
Detect: +1
Assault: +4
Search: +2

-

We'll say that the Imperions are *Blissfully Unaware*, as well as being in a *Fixed Position*, but that they have *Heavy Support* and are *In a Secure Bunker*.

The Rebels are *Small and Mobile* and have the advantage of *No Fixed Location*.

There's also some *Hostile Natives* in the area, because hey, why not? And the whole thing is in a *Thick Forest*.

So, we decide the Imperions go first. Not because of any game reason, but because I want the sample to more closely match the movie. Deal with it.

The Imperions are heavily limited by the aspects in play - they can't really attack the Rebels while they're *Blissfully Unaware*. So the GM decides that he wants to become aware of the Rebel presence. That sounds like Detect vs. Sneak.

Okay, we could roll here, but could we turn this into a scene? Obviously, we can! So we decide an interesting scene would be for a light Imperion patrol to find the Rebels, and then have a chase scene as the Rebels try to catch the Imperions and prevent them from reporting back to base! That sounds like a Contest, so we set that up appropriately. The Imperions only have a +1 Detect, which isn't going to work well for them, so they really only get a couple of mooks involved, and the main PCs manage to chase them off in short order. (There's a question here on whether the Imperions invoked their *Heavy Support* aspect to bring the speeders into play or not...)

Well, the PCs won that round, so the *Blissfully Unaware* aspect stays. The PCs realize that a direct assault will be pretty pointless, so they decide to get some help from the *Hostile Natives*. We decide that this is likely a Challenge, and that SWS will require that the natives end up believing that we are gods.

Fortunately, the player of the translator bot ends up pulling this off, giving the Rebels two free invokes on the *Hostile Natives* aspect! Go, team!

(My memory on the order of events in the movie gets a bit fuzzy here, so forgive me if I gloss over a bit).

So the Rebels decide that with their newfound friends, they have a chance to attack the Imperions and take out the shield generator. However, the Imperions have invoked their *Heavy Support*, making the resistance pretty tough. The Rebels decide that their *Hostile Natives* have come along for the ride, evening out the fight a bit. Appropriate stress values are decided on for taking out various numbers of enemies, and the Conflict is on! Some stress is done, but not enough for a Consequence - boo, hiss, the Rebels have gained some ground but haven't radically altered the course of battle - yet.

The Imperions mount a counter-attack, which ends up being fended off by the Rebels.

The bunker is getting annoying! The Rebels decide it's time to neutralize that, and spend their turn Overcoming that particular obstacle. This is done as a Challenge, representing the difficulty of gaining entry to the bunker, while fighting off the attacking Thundertroopers. Again, the PCs succeed, meaning they get access to the bunker! The fight moves inside!

And so on, until the Imperions concede or are Taken Out.

There's still some open questions I have like dealing with Fate Points - since a Fate Point expenditure at the "upper level" has so much more impact, how do I deal with them? Do I just say that expending a "upper" Fate Point requires one FP per PC? Or do I give them a separate pool? These are all good questions.

I also don't really know how I feel about the inherent one-sidedness of the Attack option. In a "normal" attack, only the attacker can deal stress. I don't know how that fits in this case, but I guess you could make the argument that a "success with style" boost could model a scattered retreat, and in most cases, the attackers will simply retreat rather than take any kind of significant casualties or loss of position.

Anyway, thoughts? Comments? Suggestions? Is this just a terrible idea within the general Fate framework?

Fiction, not Physics

"Fiction, not Physics". I find myself quoting this a lot, and it's really become key to how I understand Fate. When I first heard it, I assumed it meant "we're not concerned with realism, here!" And that's part of it, but certainly not the whole thing, and probably not even the most important thing (after all, you can have realistic fiction).

What I've come to understand this phrase as meaning is that Fate sets out to model how stories flow in actual story media - movies, novels, *etc.*

Here's an example: Let's say that our spy hero needs to get past a door, guarded by a couple of mooks in a movie. We see him slip into the shadows where the mooks can't see him. He then climbs into the pipes above the guards, and once above them drops down, taking them both out with his weight. He hauls the guards off behind some boxes and proceeds...

Okay, so in a more traditional RPG, this would be a stealth roll, probably some more notice checks, probably a roll to get up on the pipes, and then an attack roll with some bonuses.

Now, sure, you could do something similar with Fate, after all it does have elements like skill rolls and whatnot. But, really, it's better to map actions to periods of "camera time", just like in the movie. So in the first shot of the scene, we see our spy slip into the shadows... That's a Create Advantage roll, opposed by the mooks' Notice.

Then, our hero climbs up on the pipes. Again, this is Create Advantage, but against a static difficulty this time (the danger of failing is more from the inherent danger, and less from being noticed - we've already established that our character is out of view.)

With these aspects now in place (the scene is now ABOUT our hero being "In the Shadows" and "On the Pipes Above the Door"), and our free tags on them, it's a pretty easy Fighting roll to do enough stress to knock out the two mooks.

Concessions: Concessions are one of my favorite examples of this, since they, more than anything else, model fiction. Otherwise, why would **losing** make you, in a way, **stronger**?

But think of it. The second act of many movies involves our hero getting beat up, thrown around, and then coming back in the third act to stomp the living tar out of the bad guys. And that's what concessions enable.

Heck, if you put it in game terms, all of *The Empire Strikes Back* was the players colluding to grant every concession they could for a couple of sessions, to give them an absolute hoard of fate points to use to crush the

Empire! I'm convinced that the Ewoks being effective at all was simply a matter of Han and Leia's players dumping fate points into the "Useless (?) Ewoks" scene aspect...

Star Wars gives me lots of examples of Fate Mechanics at play **in fiction**, which gives me a lot of ideas on how to use them in games. Han's on the run from the Imperials, and has flown into an asteroid belt. The opposition is overwhelming, and he knows he can't win in a straight up fight, and it's a matter of time before he's worn down.

-

Han: "Hey, I'm a smuggler. I want to find an asteroid with a big cave or something I can hide inside."

George: "Sure, give me a Pilot roll."

Han: "Awesome, Succeed With Style! Let's say there's an asteroid with a big, deep cave in it."

George: "Okay, but you'll have to roll a Piloting roll to make it in without damage - of course, so will the bad guys."

Han: "No problem! I make it in fine."

George: "So do the two TIE Fighters following you."

Han: "Not so fast! I'm burning my tag on 'Deep Cave' to drop their roll... and they're 0 point mooks, right?"

George: "Yup, the TIE Fighters crash into the cave wall. You're safe - for now. You hear bombs going off above as the Imperials try to find your location." **gets a gleam in his eye and holds up a Fate Point.** "Hey, Han, don't you *Have a Bad Feeling About This?*

Han: "Now that you mention it, I sure do!" **takes the fate point**

George: "You've landed in the cave and are resting for a moment, when something hits your front viewscreen. Some kind of creature..."

Conflict with named NPCs

(I'm getting a little off in the weeds here. This is of course just personal opinion, and I'd be happy, as always, to have people tell me I'm dumb.) Conflict with named NPCs isn't really about who wins, or even tactics. It's a test of your commitment to your goals. It's a bidding war - a game of chicken.

In a roughly even conflict, there's a steady escalation of resource expenditures. Sure, you'll win if it takes nothing but some skills rolls, after all, that costs nothing. But, are you willing to spend some Fate points?

Then we escalate to consequences - are you willing to take them? Are you willing to risk being taken out?

Here's where the concession mechanic really comes into play - at any point, you can accept a loss and gain a fate point. That helps escalate the stakes as the conflict goes on.

At the beginning, it's just "the thing you want" vs getting a fate point.

Then, it becomes "the thing you want and spending fate points to get them" vs. getting a fate point.

After that it becomes "the thing you want and spending fate points" vs. getting a fate point and not taking consequences.

Then we get to the point of "the thing you want, spending fate points, and taking consequences" vs. "a bunch of fate points"

And only after that point do we really get to the point where being Taken Out is even a consideration.

And this same escalation is happening for both sides in the conflict, simultaneously. Tactics and abilities can change how quickly each side escalates, but at the end of the day it's about **how badly you want it** more than anything else.

Put a Bird Scene On It.

I think I've mentioned before, but these are more like my journal of unlearning other systems, and I'm not sharing them to be the Guru on the Mount, but more as a record of my mis-steps in hopes that others can avoid stepping in the same potholes. I fully expect lots of people to look at these and go "yeah, duh."

That's probably more true for today than any other one of these.

So, let's talk Chapter 9, folks. You know, that chapter that I totally ignored when I first read Fate Core, because, you know, I know all about this long-term game planning stuff, that chapter must be for newbs. Just get me to the crunchy bits.

You'll also note that a recurring theme in these posts is how Fate ain't other systems. So any time I think "hey, I know that" I'm probably about ready to step in it.

So I'm running my Kriegszepplin game, and a player wants to hop up his plane using some mechanics. I'm fully in GURPS/D&D mode, and so I have him roll the dice. He succeeds, gets some invokes on a Scene Aspect, and we move on. I did it right, right?

Yeah, no. Couldn't have flubbed that one more if I tried. Where was the drama? Where was the conflict? Where was the story? Nowhere, that's where.

What I **should** have done was frame this in a scene. "Okay, Eddie, the plane's in the hangar with the other planes. When are you doing this? At night, when nobody can see? Or are you being open about it? What do the mechanics think of you messing with the plane? What about the other pilots?"

Then, I could have some framing for the scene. Once I've tied this to a specific place and time, it becomes a lot more interesting - other pilots can show up. The mechanics can show up themselves. Compels start to suggest themselves. Conflict. Drama. Story. The reasons we play.

So that's my big zen moment for the day. Any time something happens, frame it in a scene. Contacts roll? Okay, where are they going that's appropriate to find these people? Investigate? Okay, they're in a library or pounding the streets. And given the new scene, how can you absolutely screw with them? What opposed interests can be there, what complications can arise? There is absolutely no mechanic that can't be improved by framing it in a scene. Fiction, not physics - if you wanted to get the desired result in a TV show, how would you show it on camera?

And it goes the other way, as well. You want your players asking for scenes so they can do stuff. Let them get the crew together before the mission

to make a Rapport roll and inspire them, getting a few free invokes on a newly created scene aspect. Get them in a diner with the Big Bad for a brief war of words, ala Heat.

There's another subtle benefit of thinking in scenes. Things **happen** in scenes. If you're in the "physics simulation" mode of what happens moment-to-moment, it's easy to get stuck playing a lot of boring stuff. But if you frame it in a scene, you've got to ask the big scene questions first - What is this scene about? What's at stake? What could go wrong? What interesting thing is about to happen? And if you don't have interesting answers to those questions, it's probably not an interesting scene and should just be skipped over. If your game was a TV show or a movie, would they waste script time on this?

Ramp it up. Put a scene on it.

Fate Core character creation

I love Fate Core character creation. But to explain why, I need to tell a story.

I was trying to play Burning Wheel a bit back, never really got the feel for it. Then I had an opportunity to play with someone that **did** get it, and it changed some of my perceptions. I remember talking about running a "tapestry" game with this guy, and he basically said he didn't see how that could work in Burning Wheel, and I totally didn't understand it.

Character creation seemed normal, and I did a lot of the usual things. Specifically, I had taken an Enemy character, as well as a friend. We worked up backstories for our characters, and awaited the first session.

Then we started playing. It quickly became apparent that the enemy was a significant enemy of the game. It quickly became apparent that the story was **about** our characters, in a way that a D&D game isn't - it was **our** story, not a story that you could drop random characters into.

This was one of the first "aha!" moments for me with narrative gaming. Backstories aren't "just" backstories. They're stories. They're what drives the game forward.

And that's why I love Fate character creation.

First, it's one of the few character creation systems that focuses first on **who** a character is, rather than **what** a character can **do**. I find it in many ways hard to create characters in other systems now, as it's an exercise in point optimization. Bleah.

The shared stories also present the party a good reason to know each other, and do a great job of banishing "you meet in a bar".

But the real reason I enjoy character creation in Fate is more than these. It's the Phase Trio. It's creating and enriching stories about these characters. Because each time I go through the exercise, we end up with a plethora of threats and antagonists in the world. We end up with story threads that need to go somewhere, and that I want to find out what happens with. I end up with complex relationships that I want to see resolve in an interesting way.

I can't imagine running a Fate game where character creation didn't influence coming events. And if I played in one where our pasts didn't come into play, I'd kind of feel like something was left out.

I've learned to dislike the term "backstory" when it comes to Fate characters. Backstory implies that it's the past, and in many gaming circles carries the connotation that it's only important from a motivational view - after all, the story was probably created before you made your characters. But your character's history isn't that in Fate. It's what drives the game. It's what

creates complications, and gives players the chance to decide what type of game they want to play.

Just Do It.

(this will likely be a two-parter, with the other part delivered when the sun's up)

One of the things I see a lot in Fate, both online and with people I play with IRL, is questions like "Does Fate Core have rules for <xyz>?"

And, ultimately, I think that's the wrong question. The **right** question is "Can I make a character like <xyz> in Fate Core?" And the answer, nine times out of ten, is "Sure can! Without using anything outside of the core rules, even!"

Crazy, right? I mean, there's no rules for cybernetics, so how could I make a character with a cybernetic arm?

Real simple. You just have to unlearn some stuff. Start by asking "what does the cybernetic arm mean?" Well, in fiction it probably means you're strong. In some fiction it means that your connection to humanity is lessening. Depending on the setting, it might also mean that people react poorly to you. The arm could malfunction, requiring repairs.

Now, I'm a traditional gamer by background. I started with Moldvay Basic D&D, and GURPS was my system of choice for a long time. I don't want to say I've played every system ever, but I played a ton of them in the 80s. I've had a chance to play in some seriously old-school campaigns - as in, run by the father of my friend, and dating back to probably 80 or earlier and being adult-run and adult-played the whole time.

I ain't saying this to win the geek wang competition, as I know there's people reading this who have way bigger geek-peeners than me. My point here is that through all of that time, my reaction to the problem of the cybernetic arm is based on figuring out what it does, how it hurts me, balancing it with some kind of character build resource cost, *etc.* I mean, I **get** this line of thinking, and I understand the urge to add this kind of stuff to Fate. It was sure my first instinct.

But it's not needed, though it took me a long time to figure that out. Here's how you build a guy with a cybernetic arm that makes him strong in Fate:

Give him a Physique skill (you could probably make a case for Athletics) of 4.

Give him an appropriate aspect representing his cybernetic arm.

That's it. You're done. Have a beer, take the rest of the day off. Seriously. You're done. No, I'm not kidding.

But how can this be? Well, you want him to be strong, so give him the appropriate skill - *Just do it.*

You want the arm to malfunction, so make the aspect and it can be compelled. *Just do it.*

You want the arm to make him super-extra strong on occasion - so invoke the aspect when needed. Most of the time, the bonus won't matter anyway, so not much difference there - and realistically, having his cybernetic arm make everything awesome would get a little one-note. *Just do it*

You want the arm to cause him to have problems relating with people - invoke the arm aspect against him when in social conflicts, and also consider compelling when appropriate. *Just do it*

So with two things, we've done a total implementation of a cybernetic arm that's well balanced within Fate, and does everything we really want it to do in terms of actual play.

If you want to go a bit further, you could add in a stunt allowing extra damage, similar to the already-existing stunt in the game. But I think it would work pretty well without it.

And this works for almost everything.

Want illusion magic? Decide what you want, make up an appropriate skill that does just that, and have the character have an "Illusionist" aspect to grant access to the skill. Bam, done. *Just do it.*

And we can go on and on with the examples. And I'll be honest - there's some cases where you really do **need** to go a bit deeper into Extras-Land to make things work. And sometimes it just adds a bit more flavor. If you're remaking *Dresden Files*, you may want to consider a bit more in the ways of stunts. In some cases, there will be bits that are core to the fiction that don't really model well without some modification - I think that *Camelot Trigger* is a pretty prime example of that.

But really, the Fate Core system gives you not just a toolkit, but a fully functioning 3d printer (thanks for the metaphor, +[Jack Gulick](#), even if I'm using it slightly different than your original intention).

I think there's some primary reasons I see people wanting to add in more "toolkit" like stuff to Fate.

1) That's how it's done, damnit! And I'll admit, that's how I initially approached the system. "Where's the rules for <xyz>?" Something different has to require more paragraphs, right?

2) Permission. The idea of *Just do it* is a bit wild to people, especially those used to running games like the ones I've talked about above, where you really can't do anything unless there's a rule for it.

3) Balance. Hey, if we just let people make up their stuff, it won't be balanced, right? I mean, what if they just make an aspect called *Awesome At Everything*? And my answer to that is pretty simple - just be mature. If you

can't figure that out at the table, Fate may not be a great game for you. But also, let's be honest - are those complex character building games really balanced? Can you tell me that all 150-point GURPS characters are equally effective? I played that game for YEARS, and I will tell you emphatically that they're not. So if the complexity isn't buying us balance, why should we keep the complexity in the name of balance?

4) People like Legos. They just do. Lots of people enjoy the character creation minigame, and trying to put the pieces and parts together in new and interesting ways, and don't really do so well when just told "well, what do you want it to be?" This is probably the biggest "real" issue with moving away from a toolkit approach, IMHO.

5) Some people want to use the Lego/toolkit approach to get bigger numbers... and that's the topic of the second half of this, if I get around to writing it.

Rob's Guide to Writing Good Aspects

(This seems to be one of the recurring things people, especially new people, have problems with, so I thought I'd toss my ideas in the ring as well. Please feel free to tell me if there are areas that this could be improved in, or are flat out wrong)

Poor aspects

Lots of people new to Fate think of aspects in terms of defining what their characters can do, as Merits/Feats/Advantages work in other systems.

Try not to think of aspects in this way, it tends to create poor aspects. Instead, the best overall view of aspects is "what would I want to see in a story about this character?"

Specifically, things that can be handled with skills or stunts should be handled as skills or stunts. You don't need a *Good Shot* aspect to hit people with a gun - that's what the Shoot skill is for. And if you want to be a great sniper, an appropriate stunt will do the job much better than an aspect will.

On the other hand, *The White Death* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simo_H%C3%A4yh%C3%A4 is pretty darn interesting, and the story of what happens to him after, or during, the war would be pretty interesting. It also covers a few other mechanical areas that simply *Good Sniper* doesn't.

Now, what a **good** aspect is becomes a bit harder to define, especially without a solid understanding of what aspects do. Don't worry, I'm not going to dive too hard into the mechanics here, as my goal is to make these ideas understandable with as little game jargon as possible.

What do aspects do?

To write a good aspect, it's fundamentally important that you understand what they do in game. While this may depend on a number of things, aspects on character typically do one or more of five things:

- 1) Grant permission
- 2) Make you awesome doing some things
- 3) Hinder you in some circumstances

4) Complicate your life

5) Create setting

We'll cover each of these, and why they're important.

Grant permission

One of the common uses of aspects is to "grant permission" to do certain things that the majority of people can't do. This is probably the vaguest of the four uses of character aspects, so I'll try to clarify with some examples.

Most people can't use magic, but a *Wizard Private Eye* can.

Most people can't use the Force, but *The Last Jedi* sure can.

Most people can't go into the palace and talk to the king, but *The Brother of the King* sure can.

Most people can't find the assassin's guild, and certainly can't get in, but *An Assassin in Good Standing* can.

As you can see, a lot of times a 'grant permission' aspect follows the formula "Most people can't <blank>, but <aspect> can".

If you've got an aspect in mind, think of whether or not it gives you any kind of permissions. If not, that's fine - not all aspects do.

Make you awesome doing some things

The most common use of an aspect is probably to make you more awesome doing things. When coming up with an aspect, try to think of things that your character might fail at if the aspect weren't true.

"My character might have missed that shot, but *The White Death* doesn't miss."

"I may not have been able to defeat those stormtroopers had it not been for *My Wookiie Copilot*"

"I may not have been able to jump out of that carbonite trap had I not been *The Last Jedi*"

"They may have seen me try to sneak by, except for the fact that I'm *One With the Shadows*"

"I may not have been able to do what I want, but I'm a master of *White Russian Diplomacy*"

Hinder you in some circumstances

This is the exact opposite of the previous section. Aspects under this category can cause failure when otherwise you may have succeeded.

Now, this is probably an odd concept. Why in the world would you want to do this?

Aspects are triggered by Fate Points. Each scene, the GM gets a Fate Point for each character. If the GM chooses to use one against you on one of your aspects, you get that Fate Point at the end of the scene.

If the GM uses them on one of the NPC's aspects, you don't get them.

Now, rest assured that the GM **will** use his Fate Point budget on each scene. It's just going to happen. The only question is whether or not you get those Fate Points, one of your fellow PCs gets them, or if they just vanish into thin air.

That said, the template for "bad" aspect use is almost exactly like the "good" ones, so you can think of them in almost the same way.

"I probably would have talked the official into doing things my way, except that I'm obviously not trustworthy since I'm *One With the Shadows*"

"I would have been able to grab onto that ledge, except my *Bionic Hand* froze up"

"I would have been able to jump out of the trap, had it not been for my *Lame Leg*"

Complicate your life

And here's another one where it seems aspects are negative. And the reason for why you want these is exactly the same - to get delicious, delicious Fate Points.

Occasionally, the GM can decide to complicate your life by using one of your aspects. If you're *The Last Jedi*, then there are probably people hunting you down, and they very well might barge in on you at the most inopportune moments. And when that does, the GM hands you a Fate Point (don't worry, there are ways to stop this from happening, but that's beyond the scope of this document).

Even without the Fate Point, wouldn't you be better off without these complications? Well... think about it. It's the GM's job to complicate your life. It's what they do, or games would get really dull, really quickly.

So to see if this applies to your character, try and see if there are ways that this will complicate your life. This is a bit different than the previous set of ideas, though, in that these situations aren't about directly helping or harming you at a task, rather they're about story-level complications.

For instance:

"Hunting down the bounty hunter got a lot tougher when a bunch of Imperials ambushed me since I'm *The Last Jedi*"

"It gets tough to work in this town, since the cops like to hassle the only known *Wizard Private Eye*"

"Man, I keep creating trouble for myself since I'm a *Known Troublemaker*"

"People keep trying to kidnap me since I'm *The Brother of the King*"

Creating Setting

This is probably the **least** important use of aspects, but it's still worth noting. Since with an aspect, you declare something as true about your character, this is a good way to make things exist in the world because you want them there.

If you're a *Guild Assassin in Good Standing*, well, then, there must be an Assassin's Guild.

These are the types of things that your GM may veto, though, so keep that in mind. But a lot of playing Fate is taking the ideas from everyone at the whole table and making an awesome story, so your GM should work with most **reasonable** ideas like this.

Actually making your aspect

Okay, now we've talked about what aspects can do for you. How do you make one?

Lots of things can make good aspects - specific items, relationships with people or organizations, internal aspects of your personality, goals, or even catchphrases. Someone who's *Got a Bad Feeling About This* is probably going to be right about those feelings at least some of the time!

So think of something that you think is interesting about your character, something you'd want to show up in a story about them.

Now, go through that list of how aspects are used, and see how many ways that you can think of to use that aspect. The more, the better! If you can think of at least three ways, you're in the right area. If some of those help you, and some of those hinder you, you're on to something good.

Go **broad** in your aspects, not specific. If you choose a relationship, consider a relationship that has a lot of implications. *Brother of the King* lets some things happen, but *Exiled Half-Brother of the Tyrant King* says a lot more! For non-relationships, think of phrases that have both flavor as well as

multiple connotations - *Mrs Fixit* has some obvious uses, but *Monkey Wrench* (one of my favorite all-time aspects) can be used all over the place - whether with hitting things with a literal monkey wrench, fixing things, or causing or being the recipient of a metaphorical "monkey wrench in the works".

Lastly, think of aspects with **flavor**. Think of things that make you excited about the character, and show the character's personality. *Troubled Life* is kind of blah. *Penchant for Trouble* is a little better, but "*I've Got a Bad Feeling About This*" says a lot about the character.

And mostly, **have fun**. This ain't rocket surgery. It's a game, and it's supposed to be a fun one. And no decision you make is super-permanent - the vast majority of your aspects can be swapped out on a regular basis, so as you get a better feel for what is and is **not** coming into play on a regular basis, you can adjust your aspects so that they become more useful to you, or to reflect character development.

Intent and Task

Okay, so I'm stealing a little Burning Wheel terminology here, forgive me. It still applies, honest!

One thing that I've seen as a stumbling block for people coming to Fate is that Fate handles rolls and actions slightly different than a lot of "mainstream" games.

In a lot of these games, you describe what you want to do, roll the dice, and then see what happens. So if you want to, say, throw somebody, the rules might say that he's not thrown, or that he is thrown, and how far he's thrown. I like to call these "task-based" games, as the player decides what task he's going to accomplish, and then sees what the result of that action is.

Fate's a bit different. Fate's in the bucket of what I like to call "intent-based" games. What that means is that a player starts with what they want the results of their action to be. Then they see if they can achieve that result.

For an intent-based system to work, you need to know two things for every action. The Intent - what it is you want to achieve, and the Task - how the heck you're going to go about doing that. Without those two pieces of information, you can't really determine how to roll for something in Fate.

For instance, let's say a PC is flying around and has an enemy plane *On His Tail*. This player then says "I want to fly through the canyons." Okay... that's probably a piloting roll, as the Task almost always determines the skill rolled, but... which of the four actions should it be?

The clearest case is an Overcome, and the Intent of the player may be to get those pesky planes off of him!

Or, it could be an attempt to Create An Advantage on either those planes, or even other opponents, something like *Lost Him In The Canyons*. The player may want that to really ensure they get those planes off!

Or, he could be pulling a Han Solo and trying to get the planes to fly into the canyons and blow up - which sounds awfully like an Attack.

So without both the Intent and the Task, we can't really resolve an action. Several of the "classic" how does this work conundrums fall into this category. Handcuffing someone to a desk - well, is it intended to be permanent and effectively remove them from the fight? If so, it's Taking them Out, and is an Attack. Is it just supposed to slow them down? It's Creating an Advantage.

Same with the Hulk throwing someone over the horizon... if you're trying to throw them over the horizon and remove them from the Conflict, you're

trying to Take Them Out, and it's therefore an Attack. If you're just trying to stun them, move them around, or whatever, it's Create An Advantage.

Getting players to say what their Intent is is often tricky, especially if they're coming from more traditional (task-based) games. I like to ask players when something is unclear "Okay, describe success. Let's say this works - what is it that you want to happen?"

Sometimes this isn't really necessary, of course. If the player says "I run him through with my sword!" you can pretty well assume that the Intent is to kill him.

Intent and Task also are important when discussing Fate Core builds and modifications/stunts. "How do I do cybernetics" is an unanswerable question, without understanding what it is you want cybernetics to do. If you want cybernetics to make people super-powered, that's one thing. If you want them to grant some other bonus, that's another. If they can reach the limit of human capability, that's fine, too.

But what kind of difficulties can cybernetics cause? Can they break down? Do they need maintenance? Could they even be hacked?

On the other hand, there's also the social aspects of cybernetics to consider - do cybernetics cause you to become removed from humanity? Do they cause others to react differently?

And really, cybernetics are a "Task". They're a means to an end. To figure out how to use them, you really need to start with what you want your game to be. If you want superheroes going around doing super stuff, then you're going to approach them one way. If you want part of the theme of your game to revolve around the loss of humanity, then you're going to approach them a very different way. All those questions combine to form the "Intent" of your cybernetics system. And depending on how you answer them, you may decide that they're nothing but descriptive fluff and have no narrative effect (people aren't against them, but you don't want them to grant superhuman abilities, and don't want them to really be troublesome, either).

And all of those are great, and can serve a particular goal. But the only way to judge the effectiveness of your cybernetics implementation is against a defined goal.

Fate Doesn't Go To Eleven

(For those of you that don't get the reference... [Spinal Tap - 11](#))

Okay, so I may have over or mis-sold this one. This is really a second thought that I think informs and supports the previous in a way that it's kind of hard for me to talk about one without briefly mentioning the other, and vice versa.

I'm going to do a little setup on this one, as I think you need to understand how I view skills to get the point I'm trying to make here. As always, this is just Rob's Humble Opinion and obviously ain't anything official. I work for a little software company in the Northwest, not a huge gaming conglomerate in San Francisco!

So let's talk about skills. Skills are how good you are at something, right? I mean, that's what it says on the tin.

That's true in most games, and is superficially true in Fate. But I don't really look at skills as "skills" in Fate, because, hey, Physique isn't a "skill". What I look at skills as is closer to "how a character impacts the scene". This makes a lot of things make more sense. If you think about someone with a gun versus a martial artist, realistically, the martial artist will be less effective given the same skill.

But, if we just say that the skill represents your ability to influence the scene, then we can kind of roll the influence of the weapon into the influence of the skill and call it a day. So with a hypothetical Martial Arts skill of 4, you'd be Jackie Chan, but with a Shoot of 4, you'd be pretty competent, as your weapon itself would be part of that scene influence.

I'm getting somewhere with this, really! Thanks for reading so far!

In the previous post, I talked about modeling a cybernetic arm primarily by just giving the character the appropriate skill (Physique or possibly Athletics), an Aspect for the more narrative bits, and maybe possibly a stunt, and calling it a day. This works because, to me, having that 4 in Physique says "I have this much influence in scenes, when I approach them in this way. *How* I got that influence is irrelevant, whether it's working out, technology, magic, or whatever."

At this point, you might ask "what if I was a body builder that had cybernetics installed, hrm, Mr. Smarty Pants?"

"Fate Doesn't Go To Eleven."

Okay, I finally got around to the post title. But what the hell do I mean by that? If you're not familiar with the phrase "goes to eleven," it comes from the movie *This Is Spinäl Tap*. In it, one of the guitarists talks about his amps

being special because while most amps have ten as the highest setting on the dial, his goes to eleven. Apparently he's too dumb to realize that it's the internals of the system that determine the volume of the amp, and that the label is exactly that, just a label.

Fate does not go to eleven. If the maximum skill you can have in an area is +4, then that's what you get. That also represents the maximum ability that a starting character can have in that area. Period. (Okay, there's stunts, too, but there shouldn't be anything granting a flat bonus). +4 doesn't need to represent the same thing in every game. It represents the maximum that a player can start with, in that game. +4 Physique could be the strongest a human can achieve in one game, and it could be Superman in another. It's a scale, a way of calibrating. It's not GURPS, where 15 STR means exactly what 15 STR means, and you have lots of tables telling you exactly what 15 STR does, and you have to have crazy high levels of strength to represent augmented individuals, or supers, or whatever.

Now I'm going to tie back to *Just Do It* again. One of the reasons that people like toolboxes is that they like going to eleven. They like hearing about the maximum value of something, and then finding a way to surpass it. "How high can we stack the bonuses?" Many folks will want to make a character with a cybernetic arm not because they think it makes a great story, but because they think that it will allow them to go higher than the supposed highest in the system - it lets them go to eleven. Which, of course, means that the "highest" in fact wasn't, and the real "highest" is totally dependent on how high you can stack your Lego blocks.

Fate doesn't do that. Fate just says, "You can have +4. And a few stunts to let you do a bit better in specific situations. You can't have more. Have a nice day." Fate just says your amp goes to 10, and if you want to be louder, you need a louder amp - aka, play in a setting where +4 means something else. It doesn't lie to you and just relabel the loudest as 11 so that you feel more awesome. It's honest in its calibrations and ranges.

Some people, of course, do love that type of charop. I personally have little use for it, and I suspect some people agree with me. And thankfully there's tons of games in the hobby, and **lots** of them support that level of charop. If I want a game that does that, then I'll play that type of game.

I'm just glad that Fate doesn't do that, and that it gives me an option that doesn't go to eleven.

Fate doesn't have a damage system

(Yeah, +Wil Hutton, you kinda prompted this, but it's been in my head for a bit).

Seriously, Fate doesn't have a damage system. I mean, read the books. Where does it say 'damage'? We've got Stress, we've got Consequences. But nothing that says Damage.

Which means we have two ways to interpret this. "No, really, they **mean** damage, they just didn't say it." Which would mean that +Fred Hicks and +Leonard Balsera are incompetent, and didn't use the proper term. I don't buy that for a second.

Which leads to the second interpretation. "They didn't use the word "damage", because there's no such thing as damage." Yeah, that sounds about right. I've found I've learned the most about Fate when I've stopped trying to interpret it and just take it at face value.

So what's Stress, if not damage? Well, at an abstract level it's a pacing mechanism. What that means more concretely is that it's a measure of how close you are to being taken out - and there's lots of reasons you might be Taken Out! And since Stress clears at the end of a Scene, it's pretty clear that it's not meant to represent actual physical damage in any way.

Well, what about Consequences, then?

Nope. Still not damage. I'm going back to "physics, not fiction" here. "Damage" is primarily a "physics" concept - what the actual physical effect something like an attack or a fall has on your body. Fate doesn't model that, and doesn't want to. It models fiction.

Now, what's interesting about fights or other conflicts in fiction is not the detailed description of exactly what the physical effects of a sword blow are. It's the **impact** that they have on the story on an ongoing basis. Whether it's Harry Dresden having a headache, or John McClane limping from his feet being hurt from glass, what fiction cares about is the impact that the fight has on the story. If an "injury" is purely internal, or in another way doesn't impact the story, **it's irrelevant**.

And that's what Consequences model. They model the continuing impact of the conflict and how it carries through the story.

And this is awesome. Because it opens up all sorts of options. There's only so many ways you can describe damage, but there's **lots** of possible consequences from a fight. Big sword hit? Sure, it can be a **Gashed Leg**. But.. that's not very interesting. But if you assume that there's no damage model, then you can also dodge aside at the last moment and hit your head, giving

you a ***Ring*** ***Headache***. You can barely parry it aside at the last moment, making you ***Fearful of Your Own Mortality***. It can destroy a mystic artifact you're holding, leaving you ***Half In This World***.

The Stress and Consequences model dictates the level of lasting impact an Attack has on a character. It's not a "damage" model, so it doesn't dictate the **type**. That's up to you, your table, and your game. Make it awesome.

The Not-So-Hidden Logic of Paying to Invoke Aspects

(Whew, long title.)

Okay, one of the things that tripped me up the most when I started playing Fate (apart from the lack of statistics/abilities - that was a doozy) was the fact that I could claim things like **Rippling Barbarian Thews** for my barbarian warrior, but they didn't actually do anything unless I spent a Fate Point on them.

I mean, seriously, huh? How does that work? Aspects are kind of like a combination of advantages and disadvantages from GURPS, only more freeform, right? If I'm really strong, it would make sense that I'd **always** be really strong, and it would be a constant bonus. I mean, that's just how the world works, right?

"Ahhhh," my older self says, as my younger self walks into the trap I set. "That may be how the world works - but is it how *fiction* works?"

Let's take a section of badly-written prose:

Nanoc, the IP-Friendly Barbarian warrior, waded into battle. He knew his target, the evil warlord Baddaguy. A screaming warrior attacked him, but Nanoc split him in half, the pieces falling to his sides. He looked around for a glimpse of Baddaguy. There! Up on that hill! Nanoc started making his way up the hill, only to find three of Baddaguy's filthy minions blocking his path. A sword strike felled one, and a parry-and-counter combination sent the next to hell. The third minion, seeing his friends die in a matter of heartbeats, ran off like the coward he was.

Now there was nothing between Nanoc and Baddaguy. He charged up the hill, screaming a barbarian warcry. Baddaguy faced him, and waved off his useless troops to battle Nanoc one on one.

Their blades clashed, sparks flying. The two opponents were evenly matched, and traded light blows, neither being able to strike a solid blow on the other.

Their swords locked. They struggled against each other, strength against strength. Nanoc's mighty barbarian thews rippled with the effort, and he flung Baddaguy down. Baddaguy cowered in helpless fear as Nanoc impaled him upon the tip of his blade.

Okay. That was crappy prose. But while Nanoc presumably always has **Mighty Barbarian Thews**, they're only really narratively relevant at one point, when Nanoc needed to really pull something out.

Compare that to just this modified first paragraph:

Nanoc, the IP-Friendly Barbarian warrior, waded into battle. He knew his target, the evil warlord Baddaguy. A screaming warrior attacked him, but Nanoc split him in half with the strength from his mighty barbarian thews, the pieces falling to his sides. He looked around for a glimpse of Baddaguy. There! Up on that hill! Nanoc started making his way up the hill, only to find three of Baddaguy's filthy minions blocking his path. A sword strike fueled by his mighty barbarian thews felled one, and a parry-and-counter combination, supported by the might of his barbarian thews sent the next to hell. The third minion, seeing his friends die in a matter of heartbeats, and quivering in fear of the mighty barbarian thews, ran off like the coward he was.

As bad as the first section was, the second one is... I feel I need to bathe in disinfectant for having written it.

But that's the fundamental reason that aspects are "fueled by" Fate Points. Nanoc's struggle against Baddaguy was the only place he really needed to swing the narrative, and constantly talking about his mighty barbarian thews is just **dull**.

Fate Core, as far as I can see, tries to emulate fiction. That doesn't just mean "a physical simulation of fictional worlds". That means the flow and structure of fiction. That means that when we look at how a game of Fate 'should' flow, our reference point should be 'does this play out like a book, or a movie?' rather than 'does this work like how it would work in the physical world'?

A slippery, ice-covered surface, in fiction, doesn't mean that every description or shot of people on it involves them slipping and sliding around. That's boring. What it probably means is that at some key moment, somebody will slip because of the surface creating some dramatic moment. And that's what Fate tries to emulate - how the **dramatic** elements work together, not the actual effects of fighting on a slippery surface. It follows the rules of fiction - regardless of realism, not reality - even 'cinematic' reality.

How I GM Fate Core

Note: This is how I run Fate. It's not the be-all, end-all. It's not the only way to run it. It's not the One True Way, and other ways aren't BadWrongFun. But it's how I run it, and it seems to fit the system well.

Step one: The Pitch

This is where I just say to some people "Hey, let's play some Fate!" I'll include a general description of what type of game I'm thinking about running: "Let's play a basic fantasy-type game!" "Let's do a game based on Brutal Legend!" or something along those lines. I don't really have a lot in mind at this point - maybe something like an overall story or theme, but I deliberately keep things pretty vague.

Step Two: Initial Prep-work

Assuming that someone is dumb enough to play with me, I'll usually then take a look at the skill list, dials in Fate, extra subsystems (Magic, armor, etc.) and propose some defaults. This is still pretty lightweight, and seriously subject to change. This is more about setting an initial stake in the ground in terms of what the game will be than anything. As part of this, I may flesh out some high level conflict that I think may be interesting - but again, this is kept very vague and loose, primarily so that I'm not overly attached to it if it turns out the players go a totally different direction. Depending on how detailed the pitch is, the planning I'll do at this point will typically be more along the lines of coming up with NPCs/factions that may be opposing each other and create dynamic forces in the world, not a series of events. They'll typically be vague, so that I can insert appropriate details from character creation.

If I'm going to muck with the phases, etc., I'll usually do so at this time and throw it past the players to see what sticks. This will be based on what makes sense, thematically, for the scenario. In general, I'll add an aspect or two before I actually remove the Phase Trio, but if I need to dork with stuff more than that then I'll consider ditching it in some way.

I'll also try to come up with some kind of immediate situation/encounter/etc. for session zero, though again, I go with lightweight

for this.

Step Three: Session Zero

Okay, now we're actually going to throw some dice. I come to this session with my prep work, a new folder for game docs, some blank character sheets, the Fate cheat sheets available, and a couple of devices that can display my electronic versions of Fate.

First is setting generation. I'm a big fan of "Places and Faces", and setting up immediate/impending issues. One thing I've found with more narrative games like Fate is that they work best if there's something that demands **immediate** attention, so I try to make sure there's at least one current issue.

I do setting generation first, as it helps give the players something to latch onto for character creation. I also try to be very permissive at this stage - there's no game, so it makes no real sense to veto anything, unless it just goes utterly contrary to the game pitch - someone wanting to be a space alien in a fantasy game, for instance. Of course, sometimes that can be worked into something that makes sense - see Warforged in Eberron, for instance...

Even in cases where there's an established setting, most of setting generation makes sense, there's just a few more defined fences that already exist. But in no published setting is every tavern, every organization, and every city mapped out to the degree that players can't add their own stuff to it, even without contradicting canon.

As part of this, I'll expand on the faces/places created, and use those to collaboratively world-build. Often, a single place/face will suggest something larger about the world, so I'll drill down on that. If organizations or governments are suggested, I'll guide the group into fleshing those out.

Then, character creation. I generally run this by-the-book. I'm a huge fan of the Phase Trio, and think it's something that adds a lot of value to Fate games, especially in terms of making the game **really about** the characters. If you've already got a plot planned out that won't be impacted by your characters' backstories... it's less important. But that's not why I play Fate.

I do the phase trio very collaboratively. I go from player to player, as each phase goes out, and have them say what their story is, kind of on the spot. I encourage other players to make suggestions or give input, and if the player whose turn it is seems stuck, I'll ask them for their kind of general thoughts on what they want, even if it's somewhat vague. The idea here is to keep everyone involved and active and thinking creatively. A second goal of this is to have all of the players involved with **all** of the characters, so that they have

some knowledge of these characters and some investment in them. I is a sneaky GM.

As we're going through the phases, I try to look for recurring themes, pull out oppositional NPCs/groups, and start merging this into any previous ideas I had about the big players in the scenario. If something pre-planned doesn't fit, I ditch it. If there's a clear theme in the characters, I run with it. If some of the backstories imply setting facts that don't work with my preconceptions, I run with those and ditch the preconceptions. This, to me, is really about the players telling me what kind of game/world they want to play in, and it's kind of my job to provide that.

I have two primary jobs during all of this: Recording what is said, and keeping things moving. I'll offer my own suggestions and input, but I don't really assume that my input has any more weight than anyone else's.

If there's enough time after character creation, and there's enough for me to grab onto, then I'll run some kind of initial encounter/inciting incident. I usually **try** to get to this, since many people aren't used to a 'play-less' Session Zero.

Step Four: Post-Session Zero

This is probably the biggest prep time for me, even more than keeping the game going. What I need to do now is to take my initial thoughts for what the game might be and reconcile them with what the players and I came up with. Between my initial thoughts, the current and impending issues, setting creation, and player backstories (via the Phase Trio) I'll have a number of elements to play with. Now, I take these elements and try to integrate them into some kind of consistent setting.

This will often require the creation of NPCs. I focus more on NPC creation than plot creation - characters drive stories, not events. Events happen due to conflicts between characters. I'll try to have several NPCs/organizations/groups acting in opposition to each other, to keep things interesting. Depending on the game, I also try for a little ambiguity - bad guys who have good intentions or do some good work, or good guys that have bad methods, or even two groups that both want incompatible versions of good. I find these types of things make for more interesting stories, generally. I'll write all this down in my campaign folder, and use it to generate several possible initial arcs, where an arc is usually defined by some NPC/group trying to achieve some goal. I'll look at what their goal is, how other groups might be involved, and go with that. Part of this is always going to be looking

at character aspects for things that tie into the characters - the story **is** about them, after all! Though that is **generally** not an issue since these groups/NPCs/goals have generally come out of setting creation, character backstories, or the current/impending issues! Still, ensuring that things are somehow tied into characters is always a good thing to do.

Step Five: Arc Generation

This is where I start actually planning the arc. I set this out as a separate step, because there's a big loop here in longer games that goes back here when an arc is resolved or is starting to be resolved.

Arc generation is usually about taking one of the preliminary arc ideas from Step Four, and fleshing it out. Again, I focus on NPCs, **not** events. Who is trying to achieve what? Who might be in the way? Who might assist them? And, perhaps most importantly, how do the PCs get dragged into this? The best arcs, again, are about the PCs in some way or another, and wouldn't work if you had a different set of characters. That's a pretty good heuristic on story arcs, anyway.

So, anyway, for arc generation, I usually try to answer some pretty broad questions, and leave it at that. Those questions are:

- 0) Why is this relevant to the characters?
- 1) Who is involved in this?
- 2) What are they trying to achieve?
- 3) Who might be opposing them?
- 4) Who might be helping them?
- 5) What will they do, if unopposed?

Question zero is especially important. When possible, the actions should stem directly from the characters in some way. This becomes easier on subsequent arcs after the first! At the minimum, what happens should be something that is directly opposed to one of the characters in some way.

More traditional players/GMs might find this artificial. I see it as a focus on fiction - in fiction, the events **are** directly about the characters, and often specifically to highlight inner conflict of the characters. This involves the characters and players more directly, and focuses the story on them. This is what changes Star Wars from a generic story about shooting lasers to a more meaningful story about the darkness within us, and the temptation of that darkness. This is what gives us recurring enemies that players love to hate.

Incidentally, one of the main reasons I use player-created opposition when possible is the simple fact of investment. Players care about things based on

how much they have invested in them. GMs often forget this - the big bad that **we** create is cool to us, because **we** have invested in them heavily. The players could care less, until that bad guy touches something that they have invested in. By stealing opposition from the players, we **start** with some level of investment, even if that's no more than the players coming up with a name! And we'll be invested naturally through the prep process. So this ends up making a more involved game for everyone.

Step Six: Pre-Game Prep

Okay, now we've got the game and arc prep done, and it's time to do the session prep. Fortunately, this is usually pretty easy.

1) So what's changed in the world since we last played, or as a result of the last session? This is my way of getting my head around all of the other NPCs in the game and what they're doing. How are they going to react to the events of the last game? How have their plans changed?

2) What are the relevant NPCs up to, anyway? Figure this out, and usually the next set of events will suggest themselves.

3) Look over the character sheets for any good compels/complications to add. Always try to tie things back to the characters!

4) Do I have an idea of where the characters are going this session? Hopefully, yes - Fate is a game about proactive characters, and so generally they should have been in motion at the end of the last session. If not, that's okay, we can get them in motion.

5) Prep some hand grenades. Hand grenades are events that occur that **demand** a PC response - even if not a particular response. They should be things that make the story more interesting. They may or may not be compels, but if they tie into a character or aspect, that's awesome! NPCs coming to the PCs for aid, revelations, NPC actions, these are all example of hand grenades.

An example of a hand-grenade from one of the last games I ran: The PCs were investigating some particularly nasty bandits, who it turned out to be were demon-infested (void summoners). One of the PCs had the aspect "Doesn't trust a pretty face", another one had the aspect "Compelled to help those in need", and the PCs got stuck with the situation aspect "They know who we are" as the result of a concession in the previous game (the inciting incident, actually). The hand-grenade was the youngish, female demon-infested bandit coming to the PCs **and asking for help**.

Demands action? Yup. Deliberately targets PC aspects, and creates interesting conflict? Oh, yeah.

6) Sketch out possible set-pieces if they're clearly coming up. This is actually the thing I do the least, as it invests heavily in a defined course of action by the PCs, and I try not to do that. As a GM, it's way too easy to get a particular course of action in mind, and subtly "guide" the PCs that way. So I deliberate go the other way and **avoid** even thinking about what the PCs will do. Instead, I create interesting situations, and, as a "fan of the PCs", get excited about how they'll deal with those situations.

Step Seven: Running the Session - Session Start

And now we're into the good stuff! I sit the players down, spread out the snacks and drinks, hand out whatever handouts need to get there, check out any character sheet updates if necessary, and ask a player to recap the last session, including any corrections/etc. from my notes.

During the game I have a laptop/tablet/etc. out that I can type on. Since I typically use pdf versions of the game books, I try to have at least two available, one set up just for note-taking.

If this is the first session, I'll break out the inciting incident and start the characters in-situ. Otherwise, it's time for that time-honored question:

Step Eight: "What Do You Do?" - AKA, Setting the Scene

Hopefully, the characters have some clear goal in mind, something that just won't stand and demands action. If not, I break out a hand-grenade and lob it at them. Done right, this will get them moving, even if in an unknown to me direction! For instance, with the demon-infested girl asking for help, I had **no idea** how that would go down, if the PCs would offer to help, if they would attack and kill her, if they'd try to track her back, or what. The important thing is to get them moving.

Now, the PCs should come up with some course of action. This is where a little GM subtle nudging comes into play. What we're trying to do at this point is to quickly drive to an interesting scene. I find there's a few things I can do to help this.

1) If the request is abstract, turn it into a real action. "Investigate" isn't a scene. "Go to the arcane academy's library and look up xyz" is a possible scene.

2) Understand what the PCs goal is. "Okay, so what are you trying to accomplish? If this goes your way, what changes?" It's amazing how often the players won't initially have an idea! Nudging them towards this allows me as a GM to:

- a) not railroad,
- b) provide appropriate opposition
- c) keep things moving!

3) Figure out who might be opposed to this, and how it might go poorly. While in some cases 'behind the scenes' consequences can be interesting, I more often prefer to keep things "on-screen".

If there's no interesting consequences, and no interesting opposition, I generally just let them have what it is they're trying to do, or briefly do a couple of rolls and get on with it. No point in spending time on minutiae.

Okay, so now we've got a scene! At this point, I'll set the scene, and figure out the appropriate skill/roll structure for the scene - challenge, conflict, contest, or just simple rolls. Lately I've been trying to do less of the naturalistic 'roll after roll' sequence in favor of more structure approaches, but that's a stylistic thing.

Note that I'll generally allow almost **any** proactive action from the players, even if it's not what I had in mind. If the players want to try something that's just utterly against the precepts of the game/scenario, I will warn them, but apart from that, anything is fair game. Three guys taking on the entire King's Guard in broad daylight? Might be a bit much, but they can try. However, if they want to try and poison the garrison? Sure! If they want to try to drum up supporters? Sure! Find a way to sneak in undetected through a hidden passage? Why not? Disguise themselves and get in the front door? Sounds good to me! The players setting the scene is more about what **kind** of challenge and story we'll have than anything else, so I'm typically willing to allow anything a chance of success unless it just makes no real sense within the fiction.

Another good thing to do when players want to do something that short-circuits a lot of things is to add complications. "You want to summon a ghost to find out who killed Baron Whatsisname? Sure, you can do that. You'll just need to find a ghost summoning spell, or a specialist. And figure out what materials are needed. And then you'll need to enter the Dead Realm to find him." Again, the player course of action is helping to determine what kind of story they'll have, it's not short-cutting the story entirely. In many cases, the player course of action will take more than a single scene, and that's fine - just handle the scenes one at a time.

Step Nine: Resolve the Scene

Took a while to get here, huh? Well, this part is pretty much in line with the Fate Core rules, so I don't really have too much to add here. The only thing I will say here is to keep looking at your characters' aspects, and look for ways to compel them.

Also, each die roll should have a potentially interesting consequence. Before a player rolls, ask yourself "what could happen to make the player go 'oh, crap!'" That's your calibration point. Not necessarily the **worst** thing that could happen. Not even the most dangerous. But what's the most **interesting** thing that could happen as a result of this if it goes wrong?

So play through the scene, and determine the aftermath.

Step Ten: Ending the Scene

Okay, so your players have done some crazy stuff. They'll either get what they want, or get something else, or encounter a setback, or some combination of the above.

Now is time for what's called in the fiction-writing business a "sequel". Recap with the players what's changed, figure out how the opposition is going to react to this in the near time, and give the players a chance to reflect on what's happened. Then - go back to Step Eight, and repeat this until the end of the session.

If a scene resolves well (as in, you've done a good job - not that the players get what they want), you shouldn't have to lob many hand grenades. A well-resolved scene will either provide the players something that they need to move forward (which is why I ask them the goal of the scene), or it will provide an obvious setback that needs to be accounted for. If investigating at the arcane library, a success might mean that they find the information that they need, which points them in the direction of whatever it is they need to find/kill/acquire/etc. A failure might mean that enemy agents have found them and are now chasing them. Either way, the players should have some impetus to keep them moving.

If for some reason, this **isn't** the case (hey, it happens), throw out another hand grenade.

Repeat Steps Eight through Ten until it's close to the session end.

Step Eleven: Ending the Session

Hey, good job. Your players are having a good time, everyone's rolling dice and laughing. Awesome!

But at some point the clock is going to tick closer to the ending time, or people will start yawning, or some other sign will occur that it's getting close to the end.

And that's a fine thing! You want to leave your players wanting more, not anxious to leave! If they want more, they'll show up next time, and you'll keep a healthy game going. If the game drags on and on, you'll start to notice players not showing up. The goal isn't to keep the game going on as long as possible - it's to keep the Awesome Per Minute as high as possible! And if that starts to flag for any reason, call it a day and get some more ideas for what would be Awesome!

One of the best things to do is to end the session on a bang. Is there some scenario-changing Compel you can throw down? Do it. Some great revelation you can make? Great way to end the session. Set things up for an epic battle? Oh, yeah. Make it a cliffhanger, and the players will want to tune in next time!

Once you've ended the actual 'game-time', you'll need to handle all the wrap-up stuff. Tell the players what kind of milestone they've hit, and what that means. Ask them if they've got any initial ideas on character changes (especially aspects!) that they may want to make. Collect all of your stuff, and do the clean-up.

But perhaps most importantly - solicit feedback. You should always ask after a game about what went well, what didn't go so well, what people would like to see more/less of, *etc.* The goal of the game is for everyone to have fun, and if they're not, then something needs to change. Also make sure that players feel they can email you or contact you privately, as some will not want to speak up.

The most important thing about feedback is to listen to it. Don't get defensive - even if you think something was awesome and that the players are wrong, don't take it personally. It's not about what's "good" or "bad", it's about what the players find fun. And that will not be the same for every player. This is a learning process for you to be able to improve your GMing skills. And even negative feedback doesn't mean what you did was "wrong" - another group may have loved it. It's about finding out what **this** group likes.

In cases where you had to make a call that was contentious, explain why you ended up making the call you did, the factors involved, and what else you

considered. Also, ask the players how they would have handled it. Be open and honest - Fate is a game that encourages this kind of behavior. Often, simply explaining the situation and asking the players how they would have handled it is enough to get them to see your side, as well.

Collect any Fate Points, and see how players are doing with them.

If they're hoarding FP, did this cost them? A session where players end up with positive FP should, in general, be one where things went poorly overall for the players (or they just got lucky). But if they're hoarding FP consistently, and not suffering setbacks, throw more compels at them and increase the difficulty of their opposition.

Are they all drained of FP? If so, they should have made decent progress - if not, you may have been too hard on them. In the future, you can reduce the opposition or provide some 'weak' compels to increase their Fate Point pools.

Step Twelve: Next Session

So now you need to start thinking about the next session. Think about the events that have happened so far, and what that means for the future. If you're honest with yourself, you may need to revise some of your plans for the future of the game - nothing prepped is "real" until the players see it, anyway!

Maybe some new characters/groups/etc. have been added to the game - make sure you find some way to integrate these!

Maybe something has been revealed that changes how you view one of the groups/NPCs in the game - again, go with it! Maybe it makes more dramatic sense for the supposed bad guy to actually just look bad, and be fighting the "real" bad guy! Maybe some innocent guy makes more sense to be the mastermind behind everything! Maybe an NPC changes their ways based on events! Remember, the world needs to react to the players - they are the protagonists, and they are the agents of change in the world! It's **their** story!

Has the arc ended? If so, plan the next arc like Step Five. Otherwise, just plan the next session like Step Six.

If the campaign has reached a natural conclusion, and there's no desire (or easy way) to continue it, then great! Pitch a new game!

There's also a couple of things that I try to do during the game. These are overall guides, and so they don't really belong in any one section.

0) Try not to predict where the game will go. This one is so important, I'll put it at rule zero. The more you predict what **will** happen, the more you'll try to make it happen. Going into a game with no clue of where it will go is quite scary at first, but is also amazingly fun once you get used to it. It also ensures that you're listening to your players, and letting them drive the game. If there's an overall arc of the game that you're expecting, like fomenting a rebellion instead of having guerilla action, or heavy political play, make sure you talk to your players about that - this is the kind of thing that everyone should be on the same page about when it comes to "this is the game we're playing." It's also something that can be readily discussed without causing "spoilers".

1) Keep people involved, but respect styles. This is something that's a bit of a balancing act. As the GM, you are kind of the mediator. It's your job to keep everybody involved in the game, but some people are just naturally more introverted, and won't be as proactive or forceful in their opinions. Try to coax interaction out of them, but don't press the issue. Your main job with this is to keep the more extroverted/forceful folks from drowning them out or dominating the game.

2) Keep things dramatic! Fate is a game about drama. It's not a very good game about prepping the hell out of things so that there's no chance of things going wrong. Don't get me wrong - that can work well with certain types of games, but those are usually the games with enough tactical 'crunch' to support this.

3) Keep things centered on the players! Show, don't tell. As I said earlier, some 'behind the scenes' stuff can be interesting, but in general you want to keep things visible and on-screen. Your job is to keep the players interested with what's happening, not keep **yourself** interested with all of the behind-the-scenes hidden stuff that you know about.

4) I usually like difficulties to be based on dramatic importance more than anything. If something is critical, make the players decide how bad they want it! Fate is more about deciding what's important, via Fate Point expenditures, than it is about micro-managing bonuses or simulating reality. So put those hard decisions front and center!

5) Keep failures interesting! Success with a cost is great, and interesting failures are great, too. What's not great is "that doesn't work." Keep things moving, even if not in the direction the characters necessarily wanted to go!

6) Solicit player input. This is a great way to offload some work. Details about a holiday? Ask the players! Who's the innkeep? Ask the players! Also, encourage collaboration. If a player feels on the spot by a question like that, ask them for any kind of thought they have on it, and then get others to jump in and collaborate.

7) Be **honest**. Fate is a great game for honesty. There's nothing wrong with telling the players the consequences of a failed roll before you roll - especially if you're planning something that's not super-obvious. Talk about why you're setting things a certain way, and encourage players to be involved in that.

8) Keep consequences appropriate. I like to say "For someone to be Taken Out, they have to be Taken Out." That's my way of basically saying that you can't shortcut the stress/consequences track by, say, throwing someone off of a cliff - if they still have stress/consequences, then maybe they're holding onto the cliff, evaded your grab and twisted their ankle, *etc.* But it works for other rolls, too. A check to cast a trivial spell **generally** shouldn't have the end of the universe as failure! This can be true even if it would "make sense". Instead, take a higher-leveled view: Even if the particular spell failing **would** result in the end of the world, maybe a failure means something else - maybe it means that as part of casting the spell, something bad happens - or it takes longer than you expected - or possibly you realize that you don't have something you need or can't summon the energy.

In general, I like to keep the results of success and failure **roughly** even. If a success in something will gain a huge advantage, it's pretty reasonable to make failure a large risk as well. While this may not always make sense from a "how things work" perspective, it's almost always good dramatically, and if you pull back and abstract just slightly, you can almost always find a way to justify it.

9) Help players with the rules and strategy! Man, if I could change one thing about the first couple of times I ran Fate, this would be it. Effective strategies in Fate aren't always obvious to new players, and as such the game can be very frustrating. Make sure your players know how Create Advantage works, especially in a Conflict. Make sure they know how to use CA to use their better skills against either environment opposition, or their opponents' weaker skills. As a GM, constantly ask yourself "hey, what would I do if I was this player?" and suggest that to the players! Have a brief conversation with them about skill matchups, stacking aspects granted via CA, and even the tradeoffs between big hits (fewer rounds to take someone out, requires more shifts) and little hits (more rounds to take someone out, requires fewer shifts).

10) This goes along with the last one. Get your players used to success and failure in Fate! Specifically, make sure they know how tough it is to get Taken Out in a single blow! Put them through a Concession early if they're not used to Fate, and show them how the game keeps going. Have them fail some rolls, and again show them how the game keeps going. Many gamers

are used to games where "failure" = "game over", so this is a key part of Fate for new players.

And... most of all...

HAVE FUN

Fate is a great game... but it's still a game! The point of playing is for everyone - player and GM - to have fun. If you're not having fun, FIX IT! If someone at the table isn't having fun, FIX IT!

The Joy of Create Advantage

While most of my posts are probably GM-centric, this one's a lot more player-centric. Hey, gotta change it up, right?

One of the things that I see with players new to Fate is that they over-rely on the Attack action in conflicts. My experience has shown that, in many cases, Attack is actually the least effective option, when viewed from an overall perspective. Sure, you can't Create Advantage someone to death (or to Taken Out, as the case may be), but CA has a lot of advantages over Attack overall, and especially as a lead-up to an actual damaging attack.

To most vets, this stuff will be obvious, so I apologize for that... but these might be good points to raise with your players, especially if they're having issues, or over-relying on Attack actions.

Here's a few of the main reasons why Create Advantage should be the majority of the players' actions in a Conflict:

1) It's more efficient.

Both Attack and Create Advantage give you the opportunity to buy shifts of effect. For Create Advantage, these shifts (via free invocations) are delayed, but for a given success threshold, you'll actually get **more** shifts of effect than Attack for the vast majority of cases...

Margin of success Create Advantage shifts Attack shifts

0 2 (boost) 2 (boost)

1 2 1

2 2 2

3 4 (two free invokes) 3

4 4 4

Admittedly, after a margin of success of four, Attack starts to win out - but you generally won't see that margin of success unless you've got a number of free invokes to boost you there, or burn a bunch of fate points!

2) Create Advantage is flexible.

Attack does one thing - it causes stress and consequences to your opponent. However, the shifts of effect (free invokes) created by Create Advantage can,

depending on the advantage, be used for Attack **or** Defense! And they also have the potential of being used by other members of your group. Or they can be used with an Attack to do straight damage. Create Advantage creates **options**.

3) Create Advantage lets you choose the skill matchup

In conflicts, and especially with an Attack, absolute skill levels are irrelevant. What's important is the **relative** skill level between you and your opponent. And one of the main 'strategy' bits in Fate is figuring out, narratively, how to maximize that difference in your favor.

Using your 'best' skill isn't always the best idea. If you've got Fight of 4, and you're facing an opponent with Fight 6, you're at a permanent disadvantage. And it's usually pretty hard to justify why you're using another skill for Attack, or why Fight can't be used to defend (substitute Shoot/Athletics as appropriate).

But Create Advantage lets you get around this. So long as the action you create justifies it, it allows **you** to set up the skill matchup. So if you've got Fight 4, and the bad guy has Fight 6? No problem... maybe you've got Intimidate 4, and he's got a Will of only 1! Scare him with that! Or use your athletics skill to set up a favorable position, perhaps challenged by his Notice skill.

Once you've internalized this, the big bruiser just looks like a big opportunity, since you know he probably has some pretty weak social skills just waiting to be exploited. (Strangely, against a superior combatant, it's often the combat-focused characters that are the **least** effective, as they have fewer good skill matchups).

Of course, an especially ninja trick is to use Create Advantage actions that are resisted by the environment, rather than the enemy - these are **very** likely to be easier to accomplish than something with passive resistance!

4) Create Advantage lets you set up huge hits

While it's not *always* the case, in Fate it's often true that a single big hit is worth more than two little ones. If you've got three stress, a pair of two-stress hits will just mark off your second and third stress boxes - but a single four-stress hit will force you to take a Consequence.

In general, bigger hits will take down enemies quicker, while smaller hits will be more efficient (require fewer overall successes) at the expense of taking more actual attacks to accomplish.

And what's the easiest way to set up a big hit? Either burn through your Fate Point supply or... set up a bunch of free invocations of aspects via Create Advantage. You know what happens to bad guys if your whole team concentrates for a round or two on Creating Advantages, and then passes all of those free invocations to your most competent combatant? **Pain.**

Combine this with the higher efficiency and preferred skill-matchup of Create Advantage, and you have a recipe for Taking Out even the nastiest, ugliest enemy you encounter (or, the most attractive, suave enemy if it's a social conflict!)

5) The Narrative Truth of Aspects

So far, I've just talked about the purely mechanical, math-based benefits of Create Advantage. But that's only part of the story.

In addition to all of the other advantages listed above, Create Advantage **creates narrative truth**. If you get your opponent *Cowering in Fear*, then he's doing that. Which should restrict his actions.

Aspects can do all sorts of things, from action permission to denial, to setting up difficulties where none existed, to granting permission for active interference.

They knock people on the ground, disarm them, have them wandering about in a fog.

And this is all **on top of** the mechanical benefits. Beautiful, I tell you!

So, anyway, I hope this helps in some way. It's based on my observation of new Fate players, and is basically a rundown of the points I make with them to get them out of the "Attack Attack Attack" cycle, and thinking more "like Fate", which often gets them into describing narrative goodness and all the other coolness I've come to associate with Fate.

Failure

So, before getting into this, I'd like to say again that these posts are about my experiences coming from a traditional game background. They're also about how **I** play Fate, and in many ways about how I've figured out how to play Fate in a way that has little friction in the system, not by modifying it or changing in when I found friction, but rather by abandoning my preconceptions that were causing friction with Fate Core As Written.

So, again, don't take what I write as any kind of authoritative source. Take it more as my revelations and me going "wow! It makes sense now!" rather than anything else. (This is also why I'm probably a bit more critical towards Fate hacks than many others - I've found in many cases that the 'need' for hacks is more about the preconceptions I've brought into the game than anything else, and that it's easier to either abandon those preconceptions, or play something that's better aligned with them if I really want that experience).

Also, keep in mind that if I say something about traditional games, or people that play them, I'm **not** being critical. I **like** traditional games! And most of the things that I portray as 'things traditional gamers say' are things that I've said myself at various points. So, again, nothing that I'm going to say in this is really intended as a value judgement at all.

Anyway. Failure.

One of the things that I've said here a bunch is that Fate is a game that encourages players to fail. I've also argued that just about any player-created plan should have a chance of working (which seems contradictory, I know). Recent posters have said that their players want a risk of death. In the past, I myself have argued that games without death were weak, and that allowing players to always have a chance of success was crazy.

These seem like a whole ton of unrelated topics, but they're not. They all come down to a key concept: Failure, and what it means in the game. (At a slightly deeper level, it's about game structure, and we'll get to that).

So in a typical RPG session, you've got some goal. The GM probably has some kind of quest path planned out. Princess Perky has been cursed! You have to go into the Clammy Caves to retrieve the Dewdrop of Decursing! And, once you do, unknown to you, Princess Perky will tell you the name of the Wiley Wizard that cursed her!

Okay, great. Heck, you could even set up a Fate game like that if you wanted. Sure, it's a deliberately cliché-ridden example, but the major elements are there.

So the characters go into the Clammy Caverns, and encounter a room with bad guys and traps and whatnot. Awesome. They get into a fight.

Okay, here's the real thing. In most traditional games, you're going to win that fight. Flat-out. Because the other real option is TPK, and that's not fun.

The trick is that players want the impression that they may lose. And so a lot of the GM's job in these types of games is to make the opposition hard enough that the players feel at risk, but weak enough that they will win.

Even players that say things like 'I want death to be a possibility' are kind of being vague and missing the point. They want the feeling of danger. They probably don't want their characters to die (or, at worst, they want death to be an inconvenience). They surely don't want a game so lethal that they have a character dying every session.

Here's an experiment: The next time that a player says 'they want a game where death is a real possibility', ask them what percentage of games that they think the game should include **their** character dying, and whether they think that resurrection should be freely available.

BTW, I don't blame players for this. When games are often about going through a series of challenges (whether they're puzzles, exploration issues, non-combat challenges, combat, or whatever), and they're gated by the solution, it becomes pretty obvious that they're very likely to actually succeed, and that the 'risk' is mostly imaginary. They just want to believe it's not.

There's two fundamental reasons for this:

1) the number of games ('Adventure Paths', I'm looking at you!) that utterly remove player agency in terms of the overall story structure

2) the number of games that don't provide for meaningful failures that **aren't** death. If you lose combat, the orcs kill you. If you fail your jump, you fall into the deathly-death pit of death. Or, you lose hit points, which will either eventually result in death, or effectively has no consequence.

Okay, so let's get back to Fate again, and more 'narrative' styles of games in general.

In Fate, death is a rare occurrence. By the rules. To kill someone, you have to Take Them Out before they can concede, and even then you have to explicitly choose that they die. There's no automatic death condition, and Taking Someone Out before they get a chance to react or concede is virtually impossible.

To my traditional game eyes, when I snap back to that mode, that makes it seem like you can't fail in Fate. So, why bother playing?

A similar issue occurs when you get to things like 'if a player wants there to be a hidden passage, give it a chance to exist.' My traditional gamer brain

hears this and says 'what? That fortress is a challenge, designed to test the players' abilities. If you just let any old thing possibly succeed, then what's the point?'

And here we get to the crux of the matter, truly.

I've described this kind of 'gated event' structure a bit before, I think. And you know what, it can be a lot of fun in the right game. There's nothing wrong with puzzles that are meant to be solved - you can buy jigsaw puzzles all over, and they're clearly meant to be solved, and the challenge of the jigsaw is figuring out how to do it. That's a lot of fun!

But other things exist that let you make pictures. Like crayons. And crayons let you make any picture you want. That's crazy! Where's the challenge! How do you know you've done it right?

Here's the thing. I adore Fate. Truly. It's one amazingly elegant system. And I find it incredibly poor at producing the types of challenges I find in traditional games. It's a weak tactical skirmish game, at best. The rules don't have a lot of support for 'puzzle-solving' type activities, either. The existence of Fate Points essentially means that players can 'buy' success at just about anything.

And with a weak challenge system, the whole idea of 'gated challenges' utterly fails.

So when traditional game players say things like 'what's the point, you'll always win!' they kind of have a point. Fate is a pretty bad system to run traditional (gated challenge) adventures in.

So let's not try. Let's rethink what these 'encounters' are. And let's use the rules to guide us.

Let's look at an incredibly simple situation. A locked door.

In a traditional game, you'll have a chance to get past this door. If you fail, you fail. If you **really need** to get past that door, you're SOL. But nothing else will likely happen, just the door doesn't open.

But if you really need to get past that door, other options will be available, somewhere - this is often called "The Rule of Three". And while it seems like it's not the "gated challenge" structure, it really is - there's just multiple 'solutions' to the challenge.

But... what about in Fate?

Fate Core, pg. 187: *If you can't imagine an interesting outcome from both results, then don't call for that roll.*

Whoa. That's weird. Does that mean if you can't think of how to make opening the door interesting, then it just opens? Where's the challenge in that???

But there's a hidden gem in there that's the key to understanding 'failure' in Fate. If you have an interesting outcome for both results, then opening the door isn't a "gated challenge". It's a fork in the road. It's a place where the story can go one of two places, and you *don't know which one will happen*. So the roll becomes less about 'do we pass the challenge?' and more about 'how does the story progress?'

So with the door, we want to break it down. Great. We now need to come up with an interesting failure, another way that the story can go. "It just doesn't open" isn't a story, it's a stall in the story. It kills momentum, and doesn't progress anything. But... trying to break down the door is probably pretty noisy - so if you keep trying it, maybe someone will hear you... Now you've got an interesting branch! You can either get through the door, or be found by the guards! Either of them will keep the action going, and either of them can make an interesting story.

I've suggested the idea of 'Fractal Challenges' before (the idea that a single roll can be expanded into a Conflict, Challenge, or Contest, and that the inverse is true as well). So let's look at Princess Perky from the same view.

In the original version, if you don't make it through the Clammy Caves, you don't save Princess Perky, and she doesn't tell you who the Wiley Wizard is. And, due to how traditional systems generally work, the available choices will probably be 'you get the Dewdrop of Decursing' or 'TPK'.

In Fate, the same 'interesting result' rule for a single roll applies to a Conflict as a whole. If there's not an interesting result if you fail the conflict, don't have one. So what does failure mean? Well... it could mean you're captured. It could just mean you don't get the Dewdrop... which could mean that Princess Perky doesn't get cured. What happens then? Maybe Princess Perky turns into some kind of demonic vessel? Maybe the curse spreads across the town over time, cursing NPCs that the players either have relationships with, or that are useful assets. Maybe Baron Boring even gets cursed, and declares the PCs to be outlaws, and causes them to be hunted! By viewing the Conflict as a decision point, as a branch in the story, rather than a challenge to be overcome, we allow for 'failure', where in the traditional game failure tends to be rather game-ending.

For the third example, finding a secret passageway - again, the roll indicates less 'we overcame the challenge' than it indicates 'how will the story progress?' Finding a hidden passageway doesn't mean that the challenge is defeated. It just means that the story progresses a different way - it becomes a story about trudging through the dark, forgotten passages underneath the castle, and the horrors that lurk there. Maybe you figured that the game would be more about being sneaky and stealthy. Or heroically fighting into the

castle. Or some masterful bluff. But a scary hidden passageway story is just as good, and can be just as tense. And you might still get your way - after all, if the attempt to find the passageway fails, then something bad is likely to happen as a result of the characters poking around!

And here's the thing - since 'failure' will generally mean that things get worse for the heroes, it can be a real threat in **every single encounter**. You can run the game so that **no encounter** is guaranteed. Your failure rate can be 50%. PCs can go into every encounter knowing that something is on the line, even if it's not usually their lives. Instead of winning 99% of the time, losing will be a real threat.

I'll go so far as to say that every die roll in Fate should be tense. That's where the system works best. This isn't a game where the goal is to stack your bonuses so high that you never fail. This is a game where failure should **always** be a possibility, where things getting worse can **always** happen.

Because here's the thing - Fate Points and the concession mechanics also combine to ensure that, in almost any situation, players can get their way if they choose to dedicate enough resources, in terms of Fate Points and consequences. I've seen it said here that the initial die roll isn't about whether you succeed or fail, it's about the cost of success. And that seems pretty accurate.

So, when I see questions like "how do I make sure a fight is challenging, without having the players lose", my answer is "who cares?" Make it tough. Let them buy their way out of it and carry those consequences. Or let them lose, and let the story go that way.

Fate isn't easier because of these things. It's harder. A Fate game, run **as Fate** can be far more brutal than any D&D game I've ever played. Embrace this. Embrace failure in your games. Embrace not knowing what will happen. Embrace rolls, Contests, Challenges, and Conflicts as decision points. Embrace Concessions, and don't think of them as a cop-out.

Failure is a core part of Fate "as Fate". Embrace it.

Demystifying the Fate Fractal, and the Nature of Aspects

(AKA, how are those even related?)

So, my first real exposure (in terms of playing Fate) was Spirit of the Century. I had come from a long history of playing traditional games. And so I saw Aspects and thought "Hey, neat! Those are just like Advantages/Feats/Edges/etc.!, except you get to name them cool things and you can make anything you want!" It seemed pretty obvious, and pretty cool. Having figured that out, I went on to the rest of the system.

Except that I was wrong. I couldn't have been any more wrong if my name was W. Wrong Wrongenstein.

This was just one of my first errors in understanding Fate, but it's a pretty significant one. I was thinking of an aspect as primarily something that gave a bonus, and something that was attached to something else, like an adjective. And you can make an argument that some aspects are like that, but it's really not a very good understanding. An aspect is both simpler, and more complex than that.

An aspect, really, is a story element. It is something, anything, that is important to the story in some way. It's an 'aspect' of the story, if you will.

At it's most simple, it's something that the story is about.

I'm going to go back to 'narrative first' here. We need to understand what is important to the story (at least at this point, this scene), and then we capture those things, stick little labels on them, and call them 'aspects'.

But what about characters, you may ask. They're important to the story, clearly! And they're characters, not aspects!

Ah-ha! You have fallen into my trap, oh non-existent-person-that-I-put-words-in-the-mouth-of! You're assuming that characters aren't aspects, but they clearly are!

Well, then how come characters have skills, and aspects don't? I mean, clearly *Pitch Darkness* can't drive a car!

And here, perhaps, there's some presumptions made about what a 'skill' is. A 'skill' doesn't represent training. It represents the ability of a story 'aspect' to influence a scene, without being invoked by someone else.

Okay, that sounds like a bunch of crazy meta-talk, so let's try and get back to English.

A character is a story element. It can influence a scene. It does so by using skills. What a skill represents, then, is the ability for an story element to influence a scene, without the influence of another.

So, what about *Pitch Darkness*? It certainly can't drive! This is true, which is why it won't have the Drive skill. But, depending on the game and scene, it **can** influence things! Darkness can make people paranoid, it can cause them mental stress. Instead of having a bunch of rules for all of these things, Fate just handles it by saying 'Sure, *Pitch Darkness* can be active and influence a scene if appropriate. Just give it skills'.

And this is one of the fundamental points of the fractal - that story elements can influence scenes, and they do those using 'skills'.

A character isn't really any different than *Pitch Darkness*. It's just easier to lump up some commonalities of story elements controlled by players, and call it a 'character' by convention.

And story elements can have other story elements. The character story element Han Solo is associated with *The Millennium Falcon*. It's easy to call the Falcon a 'detail' of Han Solo since, if he wasn't in the story, the Falcon wouldn't be either. So we declare *The Millennium Falcon* to be an 'aspect' of Han Solo (who is, himself, an aspect - a story element). And, of course, the Falcon can have its own skills, and its own aspects (*Hidden Storage Everywhere*, for instance).

And that's a pretty good description of the Fractal. But there's one piece that's missing. A fundamental feature of fractals, in math, is that they have infinite detail. You can zoom out of them, view them at a larger scale, or zoom into them, and see them at a tighter scale, and they still have equivalent detail. That's pretty cool. And it's pretty important to understanding the Fate Fractal, as well.

Let's say we're playing some fantasy game, and there's the setting aspect *The City State of Warrington*. It's relevant to the story, so it's an aspect, and as such can be invoked or compelled.

Now, later on, our protagonists get closer to Warrington, and so it becomes more relevant to the story. We can start giving it aspects of its own, such as *Rules With An Iron Fist*, *Constantly Guarded*, and *Bloodthirsty Militia*. We can give it skills, like Conquer Other City-States:4.

Now, let's say that our protagonists get closer to the city. The city is constantly guarded, but we want some more detail, so we can declare a *Gate Guards* aspect. If the protagonists maintain their distance, an aspect, by itself, is probably sufficient to indicate their effect on the scene.

But if we get closer, we might want to have some more detail there, again. Maybe we decide that there's a *Fat Guard* and a *Skinny Guard*. As we get closer, maybe they get some aspects of their own. And certainly, if we storm the gates, they'll need skills, and possibly equipment, and so on! And even

their equipment could get aspects - if a PC uses Create Advantage to declare that the Skinny Guard's sword is old and brittle, then so it is!

This is, fundamentally, what the Fate Fractal is really about. It's about having a universal way of describing story elements, and their ability to impact the world. It's about having the ability to describe these elements **with the right amount of detail for the current scene**. I don't need to know specifics about the two guards if I'm a hundred miles from Warrington. I need to know that it exists, and that it's oppressive.

But as I get closer, its ability to manipulate things becomes important. I need to know more about how it impacts the scenes characters are in. So the Fate Fractal gives me tools to flesh this out. Even the guards go from being a generalized aspect (*Gate Guards*), to individuals, to individual elements containing skills, and possibly even sub-elements.

And none of this changes a single thing about them, at any point. The guards don't suddenly 'gain skills' when I get close to them. They always had them. It's just that they weren't actually important until we were in a position to interact with them. They didn't 'change' from 'aspects' to 'characters' - that's a false distinction. They were **always** aspects, in that every story element is an aspect! And they were always 'characters', because what else could a guard be? But as we needed to know more about them, we detailed them out further, and when we didn't need that detail, we didn't have to think about it. The city-state of Warrington didn't become a fractal aspect when we needed more detail - it's still 'an aspect', just one with less detail associated with it. Nothing about its fundamental nature changed.

So if you have an aspect that needs to be active in a scene, just give it a skill! There's no change in 'type' that needs to occur. 'Skills' is just how story elements impact scenes, without being driven by another story element.

It's all just aspects. All the way down.

Until you reach the turtles.

Some advice for new Fate players

Character Creation

- Choose your aspects wisely:

- Remember, aspects are more about your character's story than anything else. Feat/Advantage equivalents are in stunts.

- Choose your top three skills carefully. It's a tendency in many games that hyper-specialization is the way to win. This is less true in Fate, where skills tend to be more "complete". Think of a variety of scenarios you think you'll be in, and try to have a skill that will be useful in each - Remember that the advice for GMs, for solo enemies at least, is to have their peak skill at the PC peak +2. When encountering an enemy like that, you'd better have something that can target one of their weak areas.

- Remember that nothing on your character sheet is permanent. Skills, stunts, aspects, they should all change over time.

- If you can, don't set all of your stunts at first. See what situations you find yourself in frequently, and tailor your stunts to that (and your character).

- Seriously consider the stunts outside of the typical "+2 to skill when <circumstance>" mold. They can be surprisingly effective.

- Make sure you and the GM have an understanding of what your stunts and aspects do - when they come into play, how they can be used, how they won't be used.

Basic strategy

- The number one "strategy" in Fate is to get a good skill matchup. Try to find a way to bring one of your better skills into play.

- Against any opposition, it's more important to have a higher relative skill than a higher absolute skill. +2 vs. +0 is better than +4 vs +6.

- Don't get too paranoid even by imposing opposition. It's nearly impossible to be Taken Out in a single hit.

- Create Advantage is your friend.

- Teamwork is also your friend. You may not be able to get a good Attack matchup, but you can definitely pass along those free invokes (if narratively appropriate) to someone else on your side, who can use them to clean up.

Playing the Game

- Play "fiction-first". Think of what you want to do in the "fiction", and then work with the GM to translate that into game mechanics. Frankly, Fate doesn't really have enough "crunch" to play a mechanics-first game.

- Prepare to fail. Fate is a game where occasional failure is encouraged. Don't fear it. If you're playing Fate "by the book," a failure of any sort doesn't end the game or the story, it just pushes it in a different direction. Don't feel you have to "win" every encounter/scene - save the Fate Points for where you **really, really** want the story to go a particular way.

- Conceding is your friend. If you're getting your butt handed to you, Concede! It's a lot better than being Taken Out, and you'll even get Fate Points for it!

- Self-compel whenever you can. The GM **will** complicate your life. That's his job. By self-compelling, you at least get a Fate Point out of the deal.

- Be proactive. Call for scenes. Figure out how you want to drive the story forward. A good Fate GM will work with this - after all, your characters are the protagonists and **should** drive the story, not just react to what happens.

- Think in terms of goals. Your actions should be geared to drive the story forward. Figure out what "amazing success" looks like, and make sure the GM knows what you're after. Fate is less about probing the existing scenario, and more about driving a story forward. Even if your "amazing success" doesn't make sense for some reason, the GM can at least give you something similar.

- Negotiate with the GM, but accept that some things won't go your way. In Fate, the GM has a lot of power. And sometimes you'll disagree with him. Fate also recommends bringing things up to the table, and so a good GM will do so when there's a dispute. Sometimes, though, you'll still disagree with the final answer. Deal with it. If it's not happening all of the time, and isn't just completely ruining the game, let it go. Think about it after the game, and if it still bugs you, take it up with the GM - away from the table.

Fate's Big Question

This is something that's been poking around my head for a bit, and I think I've finally figured out how to express it.

I think that all RPGs have a "Big Question" - that is, a fundamental decision-making exercise that's really the point of the game. To a great extent, competence with this question is what separates a "good" player from a "bad" player in a given game, so that's a useful metric to figure out what this Big Question is.

For early D&D, the Big Question was "can I use the resources at my disposal, and those I get on the way, to get as much treasure as possible out of the dungeon without dying?" And by looking at that Big Question, we can kind of see the choices that drive the game - resource management, the risk of death, and a desire to gain treasure. It's all there, spelled out in front of us.

The vast majority of RPGs today have variations on the same Big Question: "Is my ability to build a character, and my ability to manipulate the mechanics of the game, sufficient to overcome these obstacles?" And that's how most games are played - the first two factors, in various proportions, are put up against a set of obstacles to see if the player is skillful enough to beat them.

(BTW, I understand that most games aren't "just" that. I'm not talking about the totality, just the primary emphasis).

And because a lot of elements in Fate look like those systems, it's pretty common to assume that Fate has the same Big Question.

But it doesn't.

Fate Core doesn't really allow for optimization in a way that makes charop an interesting exercise. Character *building*, sure. Character *op*? Not so much. If you're halfway proficient in the system, it's hard to make a character that's really incompetent, or super-competent. (As an aside, I find the biggest issue with charop in Fate is, ironically enough, people that over-specialize, which is the **best** strategy in most games).

And Fate Core's mechanical systems don't really support a deep game of mechanical fiddling. Again, yeah, there's some basics, but once you've got the general hang of using Create Advantage, the mechanics of Stress/Consequences, and how to get good skill matchups, you're pretty much good to go.

So, those can't be Fate's Big Question. But what is?

One thing that I've been saying a lot more recently about Fate is that a Fate Character can do **anything**, but they can't do **everything**.

Now, that's obviously an exaggeration. There are some things that character just **can't** do in a given setting. But that's not really what I'm talking about.

What I'm talking about here is the fact that, given sufficient Fate Points to spend, and sufficient willingness to take on Consequences, a character can accomplish just about any reasonable goal. If the character wants to sneak into the castle, **he will**. It's almost inevitable. Almost **anything** can be accomplished.

But doing so will deplete those resources. You'll end up out of Fate Points, and with your Consequences all consumed. And then you'll find yourself at the whims of the dice next time around - which is exactly why you can't accomplish **everything**.

And to me this leads right to Fate's Big Question. And that question is simple:

"How much do you want this?" Or, since cost is really only interesting in terms of opportunity cost, "Which of these do you want more?"

And to me, that's the Big Question of Fate. And just like every encounter in a "typical" RPG has to drive towards being a challenging exercise of build/tactics, every scene in Fate should drive towards making the players make those tough choices. The choice of which thing they care about they can have, and which one they don't get to have.

That's why failure is important in Fate - if you never fail, then that means that you've gotten everything you want - and you've never had to make that hard choice. That's why we drive plots off of character aspects - because otherwise, it's likely that the players/characters won't really care enough about anything to make the choice a tough one. And that's why we let the characters be proactive - to ensure that they get to make the decisions, that **they** set up the hard choices for themselves by conveniently telling the GM what they care about, and what they're invested in.

So what a GM really needs to think about in Fate is not "how do I make this encounter mechanically interesting" (at least, primarily - though that's a great secondary concern). It's "how much am I going to charge them to get their way on this?" It's fundamentally a costing exercise, and the cost should be high. Every time they buy something, it should be painful, knowing that getting this means that there's something else that they care about that they'll have to forego, or a painful cost that they'll have to bear.

(spoiler alert)

Want an example of this? Harry Dresden. He refused to sign up with the bad guys for years, until his GM (aka Jim Butcher) made him choose between his daughter's life and signing on with one of the bad guys.

He had to make that hard choice. That's great drama. That's great gameplay. That's the point of Fate.

So drive that cost. Figure out what the players want, and make them **pay** for it. Make them give you the "you're a dick" look on Concessions or Compels. Let their priorities get them in deeper and deeper.

They'll thank you for it.

Pacing Mechanisms in Fate

So, this is something I've wanted to write for a while, but haven't gotten around to. Until today.

What's a pacing mechanism?

One of the things I see some confusion about in Fate are the various pacing mechanisms available - Conflicts, Contests, and Challenges, or as I like to call them, the 3 Cs.

So, I call them all pacing mechanisms. What the heck do I even mean by that? That seems to imply that they're all related to each other, but they're clearly not, right??

Okay, so time for Rob to get pedantic (like that's new). We roll dice in Fate to answer a question. **Technically**, if we wanted to, we could answer any question, no matter how big or small, with a single die roll - probably an Overcome.

Hell, if we were running Star Wars as a Fate game, we could do the entire game as a single Overcome roll against the Empire! But... what fun would that be?

And fundamentally, that's the point of pacing mechanisms. They're nothing more, and nothing less, than a tool to make the resolution of a single question take longer than one roll of the dice/action resolution.

(And if you hear me refer to stress as a pacing mechanism, that's why - stress determines, to a great extent, how long a Conflict will last).

But why call them pacing mechanisms? For instance, aren't Contests really chases? Isn't that what they model?

Nope. Contests don't "model" anything. They just drag things out, and provide an ending condition. Sure, their mechanics map reasonably well to how you'd model a chase, but that doesn't mean that they actually model chases. In general, you're best off if you use the pacing mechanisms **as** pacing mechanisms, and leave the modeling to the narrative level. Roll the dice, figure out the results, and then narrate the results in a way that makes it clear that one side or the other is getting closer to achieving their goal. In Fate, the "fiction", the shared imagination and view of what's going on, informs the mechanics rather than the other way around.

So, which one of these do you use? This seems to be a common question, and one that I think has a pretty simple answer, if you look at the question

from a slightly different way.

Much like Attack vs. Overcome isn't based on what you're doing, but rather whether you're trying to Take Out your opponent, which pacing mechanism you choose isn't determined by the actions that are being undertaken, primarily. It's determined by the nature of the opposition.

Challenges

I'll start with Challenges, since they have the generally easiest criteria. Use a Challenge when you don't have active opposition over the entire Challenge. This could mean that the opposition is the environment (barring Fight Fire and the like). This could mean that the opposition is unaware and inactive (see the Contest section for what I mean by that). This could mean that you **do** have active opposition, but only for part of the Challenge (in which case you can either model that as an Overcome, or as a sub-Conflict/Contest as appropriate).

Zird warding off the zombies meets these criteria. The zombies are (mostly) a passive, environmental challenge, and at any rate he's really barring the door to them. Convincing the townspeople is arguably active opposition... but they're not interfering with the majority of the challenge, and so is an Overcome. Casting the ritual is simply environmental, and is an Overcome.

Now, part of a Challenge **may** involve active opposition - such as the villagers being convinced in the Zird example. In that case, you can either treat it as a simple Overcome within the Challenge (remember, that all pacing mechanisms are basically stand-ins for a single resolution), or you can expand it out further into an inner Conflict/Contest if appropriate.

But what if you have active opposition - some individual or party that is directly opposing the question that you're trying to answer? That leaves Conflicts and Contests, which is where a lot of questions seem to come up.

Conflicts

If your opposition is active, and direct, you use a Conflict. By direct, I mean that the goal of both parties is to get the other to back down in some way - either by getting knocked out and killed, by surrendering, by fleeing, *etc.* For a Conflict, the two things should be true:

1) Both sides are committed to getting the other side to back down

2) The "question" of the conflict is either:

a) whether a particular side will back down in some way

b) something that the winner can accomplish if the opposition isn't there

So if you're trying to capture some bad guys (or the other way around), that **could** be a Conflict, so long as both sides are exchanging blows (by choice or because no other option exists). If you're trying to get past guards to defuse a bomb, that's a Conflict, up until the guards run off to save their hides, or you do.

Contests

If your opposition is active and **indirect**, choose a Contest.

By indirect, I mean simply that both sides aren't engaged in mutual annihilation. The obvious cases would be races, or a chase. It could be trying to capture someone, so long as they're trying to evade capture. It could even be fleeing from a shooter (where the question becomes "Can I make it to cover before I get shot/killed?"). But the key here is that there are still two or more **active** participants/sides - you generally don't use a Contest if one side is unaware.

Aside: You might choose a Contest with an unaware side, if that side is actively doing something that would bring the Contest to a close - a sorcerer opening a gate to an evil realm, for instance, might be in a contest with the adventurers trying to make it to his sanctum to interrupt the spell, even if the sorcerer is unaware of their presence. The real key here is the **active** bit.

In general, any time you can phrase the question you're answering as "do I <my desired goal> before they <their desired goal>" is a Contest, unless both of the desired goals are "beat up the other guy".

Choosing Based On Context

So that's the basic way that I divide up the pacing mechanisms. And it's interesting, because some high-level actions may fall under any of the three pacing mechanisms, based on the context of the action.

As an example, let's say you're a sniper, and what to shoot someone in the head. Is that a Challenge? Is it a Contest? Is it a Conflict?

If the target is unaware of what you're doing, and there's no enemy awareness of your presence, it's a challenge - there's no active opposition, so there's no "other side". There's certainly some **passive** opposition that must be overcome in some way or another, but you're not dealing with an active opponent.

If the target is unaware, but there's a patrol in the area that's hunting you down, then it's a Contest - "do I shoot my target before the enemy patrol finds me" definitely falls into the Contest template described above.

If you're in the middle of a firefight, and trying to snipe one of your opponents, then it's a Conflict, pretty clearly.

Last Thoughts

These three pacing mechanisms do a pretty good job of covering just about all situations. Some might require a bit of coercing to get into place, but they're all basically workable. I don't know that I'd mix them - shooting someone that's running to me seems mostly like a Contest, so I don't know that I'd necessarily mix Stress/Consequences into that. And again, they don't really "model" anything. They're about **pacing**, not **modeling**.

And obviously there's other ways to handle pacing besides these three. If there's something that really bugs you, come up with another mechanism to handle it! But I'd keep the general idea of these being **pacing** mechanisms intact, and keep the modeling in the narrative.

Questions and Decisions

Okay, this is more of a general RPG thing, but it applies very well to Fate Core.

So, I read *Save the Cat!* recently. It kind of opened my eyes to a lot of script structure, and pushed me in a few directions I had already been going.

I think there's two things that are critical in every RPG. Questions, and decisions.

Every RPG session should answer some question. This is what drives play, and keeps people engaged. This is no different than a story, be it book, movie, or whatever. We watch *Star Wars* because we want to know "Will Luke manage to destroy the Death Star?"

That's more of a campaign level question. But there are other questions as well - "Will Luke find R2?" "Will they find a pilot?" "Will they disable the tractor beam?" These are all interesting questions.

So when starting a campaign, ask yourself what the campaign question or questions are. A grand, sweeping question is fine, but then there needs to be something more immediate, relevant, and obtainable. "Will Luke defeat the Galactic Empire" is an interesting question, but it's huge. "Will he get off of Tatooine before the Stormtroopers find him" is a much more approachable, and solvable question.

The other thing is to ensure that the players **care** about the questions. So think about what your players care about - which is generally stuff they've invested something in. In Fate, that means their characters, but can also mean the setting bits that they've had input into. You may have a grand idea for a war between massive factions, but the players, at least to start, don't really care about your factions. You do, because you made them - you're invested in them.

Even on a smaller level, most scenes should answer a question. Sure, there are scenes that are just exposition, or character development, but a good dramatic scene has to have a question that it answers. If you can't figure that out, then maybe you should skip over the scene, or give the players enough information that they can get to a scene with an important question.

The other part of this equation is decisions. Questions set the stage, and create the drama. But player **decisions** are what answer the questions.

Whenever you're looking at a scenario, think about what decisions the players are making. If they're just going along from point A to B to C, and defeating challenges, then they're not making a ton of decisions, and not

doing much to answer the important questions. That's fine for some games, but it seems kind of counter to the games where Fate really shines.

A lot of times we look at adding mechanics, or encounters, or tweaking things, or setting up scenarios. And that's great. But I find it's best to always do those things with a mind towards "what decisions does this enable for the players?"

You've got a town that's having an internal power struggle? Great! One's clearly the good guys, and one's clearly bad... well, you've just removed a decision, in that (hopefully!) the players will align with the good guys. Instead, try to make the two sides have implications for the future of the town that aren't just "good" and "bad" - or even better yet, tie them into character aspects, especially if you can find conflicting aspects!

Same with game mechanics. Got some funky new dice mechanic you want to try? Awesome! But what decision points does it give to the players that they don't have? If the players are still making the same decisions (or worse, fewer because the new mechanics provide some kind of optimal path), then rethink your mechanic.

Note that if the players' decisions are driving the answer to the questions of the game, then **you can't know the answers ahead of time**. I deliberately avoid planning what will happen - even to the point of thinking about how cool things might be, and then stopping myself from thinking about that.

Questions and decisions. Get those, and you're pretty much golden.

In Defense of Monster of the Week

Okay, so this has been on my mind for a bit. It's a little bit less about grokking the system, and a bit more practical in terms of running sessions. Weird, huh?

Anyway.

("Monster of the week" doesn't necessarily mean a monster, of course - just any one-shot episode not related to the primary story).

Monster of the week episodes on TV get a bad rap, and they can also get a bad rap in game sessions. The usual idea is that they're filler content that takes little creativity and has nothing to do with the overall plot that's occurring.

And they **can** be all of those things. But they can be so much more.

Monster of the week sessions are great trial balloons. They're ways of throwing elements at the players and seeing what the players like. If they **like** something, it's easy to bring it back, or something like it. But if they **don't** like an element, it's a lot easier to just forget about it and move on with the game, as opposed to bringing in a new NPC that's more integrated with the overall game.

Especially at the beginning of a campaign, MotW sessions are great for helping to get a feel for the overall tone of the game, and figuring out what the group, as a whole, responds to. It's a great way to figure out what elements players will want to deal with, and to take those and start integrating them into the bigger picture.

And those are all valid points in favor of MotW sessions.

But there's a huge misconception about MotW sessions/episodes. And that's the idea that they're not relevant because they're not part of the overall plot. But they're very, very relevant. Because a monster of the week episode/session ain't about the **monster**.

It's about the characters.

Look at the first season of Buffy, for instance. Witch cheerleader mom? Totally unrelated to the overall plot. Monster of the week. Pointless, right?

Nope. Because the episode wasn't about the **witch**. It was about Buffy wanting to live a normal life, and about how she can't because of what she is.

Mantis teacher? Pointless, right? Nope. It was about Xander being unlucky (and a bit desperate) in love.

Hyena gang? That's a double-whammy, being both about Xander's desire to fit in, but mostly about how much Willow cares about Xander.

Computer demon? Another double-whammy, hitting up Willow's unluckiness in love as well as Giles' love of books/discomfort of technology.

The point of these episodes isn't to advance the plot. It's to highlight and flesh out the characters that are involved. And that's the key.

So if you're doing a monster of the week, great! Good for you! But do it **right**. Make it about the characters. Don't start with a monster idea. Start with the aspects of the characters, and then make up a 'monster' that reflects that aspect, or shows the weakness, or drives that conflict home.

Fate Core Thought of the Day: Aspects, the Information Economy, and Chekov's Gun

(No, not the Star Trek guy).

Okay, I think most people are aware of Chekov's Gun - "if a gun is on the wall in the first act, it should be fired by the third."

Ultimately, what this really means is "don't bother the audience with extraneous detail." Especially in a play, everything that's there should be there for a reason. There's a deliberate choice that's made to focus on what's important, and remove everything that isn't.

We see this in TV shows, movies, and books, as well, but not to as great of an extent. Most of these media try to immerse their audience in the reality of what's happening, something that's generally not a goal for plays. And so there might very well be a gun on the wall that never gets fired, or a shadow that nobody leaps out of.

But the camera will never focus on those things. And that's a useful way of looking at it, as well - an aspect is something that gets camera focus in describing the scene.

To put it another way, there's a difference between a scene being dark, and a scene being Dark. A dark scene may be a poorly lit bar - but the lighting is just ambience. It doesn't influence the plot in any way. It doesn't really impact how the characters do things. It's just there to set a mood.

A Dark scene is different. In a Dark scene, we can expect somebody to jump out of the shadows at some point, or disappear into them.

And that's kind of what aspects are. They're the things we're pointing out to the players as important. We don't try to capture every detail, or worry about the minor things that have a slight influence on what happens. Size advantages/disadvantages aren't a big deal, until you're talking about something on the level of Bruce Lee vs. Kareem Abdul Jabaar... yeah, one guy might have a slightly longer reach, and one guy might be slightly faster, yada, yada, yada, but all of those are minor factors.

Fate worries about the major factors. It worries about the big things that will swing how the scenes play out. It doesn't worry about the minor effects, even though those certainly can add up to a big effect - but it assumes that, like a TV show or movie, that those turn out to be a wash most of the time.

Now, since we don't have full control of the story, we can't fully obey the law of Chekov's Gun. But it's important to keep in mind that every aspect should be something that **could** be important, and that **could** be something that causes the scene to swing a different way.

And that's why aspect "spamming" is kind of a bad thing. The point of aspects is to restrict what the players have to think about, to restrict the important elements in a scene. If your scene has a list of twenty aspects, then you've destroyed this economy of information, and have reduced the value of calling out things as aspects in the first place.

Character Creation Musings

So, I've done character creation a bit. Mostly because I force my players through it for one-shots, since those often end up as a sales pitch for the game as a whole.

Anyway.

Through doing character creation, I've noticed that there are some things that are very quick, and some things that aren't. I've also noticed that some things are very valuable, and some things less so. Annoyingly, many of the things that are less useful are also the things that take the longest.

I've decided that I like scoping out the "First Adventure" phase as "your first spotlight episode". It seems to help players in coming up with stories (antagonists, etc.) rather than vignettes for their first adventures. It also eases some of the time issues that I've had occur. A nice side bonus of this is it gives me a pretty good idea of what the players think an episode/minor arc should look like! I don't see a lot of problems with this, except that it leaves out the possibilities for stuff that occurred before the "series starts". Luckily, that's handled well by...

I add the Early Life and Turning Point phases back in. I think it was +[Ryan Macklin](#) that suggested this, and I think it's a great idea.

Of course, this only really works if you decouple aspects from phases, so that's a given. Fortunately, one of the low-benefit, high-cost areas that I see is defining aspects at character creation. At this point, the character is usually being felt out, and I always give the go-ahead for massive aspect modification after the first few session. So, if I'm going to do that, why not just allow for FAE-style aspect creation on the fly?

Same with stunts. Stunts have been the highest-cost, lowest-value part of character creation that I've seen from day one, so I've switched to FAE style, on-the-fly stunt creation. If people have stunts that they know they want at the start, that's fine of course.

I also only really ask that players fill in the top three skills, though I find that generally they do the entire pyramid.

Procedurally, I think this will go something like: 1) Go around the table, come up with High Concept 2) Go around the table, come up with Trouble

3) Go around the table, do early life/turning point as appropriate 4) Go around the table, do first spotlight episode 5) Go around the table, do first crossing paths

6) Go around the table, do second crossing paths 7) Opportunity for people to write down aspects if they choose and get input 8) Individually

write down your top three skills, + more and stunts as appropriate

„Missing“ rules in Fate

There's a lot of rules that Fate "doesn't have". In many cases, these seem to be rules that are derivatives of the core rules, may be different based on a particular setting, often are variable in nature, and can easily be agreed upon at the table if you have reasonable people.

Take the eternal example: "on fire". Many games say "being on fire means you take some amount of damage per turn."

That's one interpretation. Fate allows for that, with the fractal (though it's usually framed as an attack, not an automatic damage. Close enough.)

But being "on fire" could mean lots of things, everywhere from being fully engulfed in fire to having a couple of flames on your sleeve. Is one answer really correct here? One single mechanic? If not, how many mechanics would it really take to cover all the possible situations? Do we just handle the mechanical, physical effects? What about the instinctual terror that something like being on fire tends to cause? I mean, get me around a wasp, and I guarantee I don't act in any kind of rational manner!

And that's assuming a single genre. A similar cause (say, having your clothes on fire) might have very different effects in different genres - an Action Movie Star might just blow it off, while someone in a horror movie could totally freak out.

Fate Core's model (figure out what you want to do, then apply the rules) handles these variations incredibly well.

There's disadvantages to this approach, of course. The lack of explicit mechanics means that there's room for negotiation and disagreement. If you can't come to some kind of an agreement without Appeal to Authority, Fate isn't going to work for you. If every bit of judgement call is going to result in an hour-long argument with flying dice, Fate definitely ain't the game for you.

Personally, I prefer to game with people that can compromise, accept judgement calls, and don't have to argue about every little thing. So in that way, this weakness is actually a feature, as it's a great way to detect people that I probably won't enjoy gaming with long term anyway.

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