

AUTHORITY & REPUTATION ON THE WORLD TRAIN

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The following is an official FATE CORE rules supplement, created for Nick Bate as part of a FATE CORE Kickstarter commission. It is provided as part of Nick's World Train setting: an urban steam fantasy cop show, in which the PCs are (volunteer) Conductors aboard a huge train, miles-long, that circumnavigates the globe every few years.

REPUTATION

If an aspect identifies you as a member of the group, there are many things about that aspect that are strictly internal to your character and her history. Training, experience, resources, contacts and many other things are a function of the aspect itself, and well within the player's domain.

However, such aspects also come with elements that are outside of the player's control, including the reputation of the group. In a fairly static game, this reputation may simply be a basis for compels, but in a more cosmopolitan game, reputations can be much more fluid. That is, your reputation can depend a lot on the perception of the people you're dealing with.

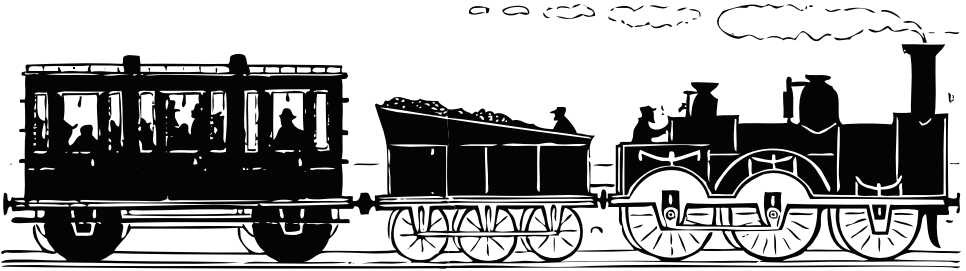
When you want to track reputation with a little bit more granularity (for reasons we'll get into in a bit), then view the reputation aspect as a place where the audience hangs three other aspects, each of which might complete the sentence "[Group] is [Aspect]". Each of these slices of reputation is a *perception*.

Example: *In a well maintained, urbane section of the train, the Conductors might be viewed as Helpful, Reliable and Horribly Old Fashioned. In a place where the title of Conductor has been taken by gangs and thugs, Conductors are Bullies, Dangerous and Best Avoided.*

SO WHAT?

Obviously, sketching out the details of a reputation offers a bit of nuance when it comes time to use the reputation-aspect, but this is a lot of extra work just to accomplish that. Thankfully, there's a few other cool tricks where we can use this information.

All of this rests on the assumption that reputation is important to the campaign. This is certainly not going to be true of every game, but it's very relevant when games are driven by unified membership (Conductors, musketeers) or factions (Conspiracy, Political).

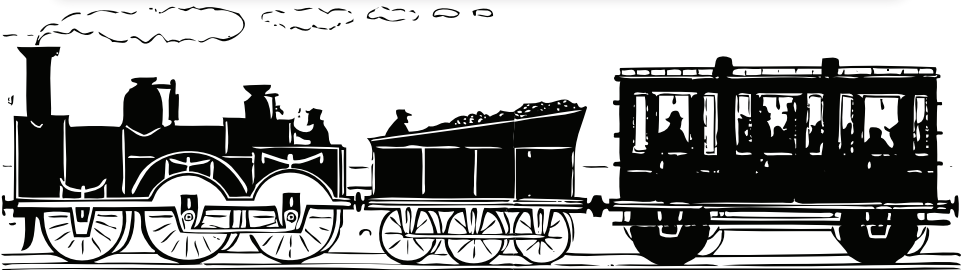


THE FACTION-DRIVEN GAME

If you wanted to do a faction-driven game, then these reputation aspects become an easy way to do a cross reference chart of what each faction thinks of the others. For example, if we had the imaginary Reds, Blues and Greens:

	REDS	BLUES	GREEN
REDS	HONORABLE, LOYAL, Do WHAT'S NECESSARY	UNTRUSTWORTHY, CUNNING, DON'T TURN YOUR BACK	FIERCE, UNPREDICTABLE, CREEPY
BLUES	UPTIGHT, THUGGISH, SELF-RIGHTEOUS	SCHOLARLY, COMMITTED, ONLY ONES WHO CAN HANDLE THE TRUTH	WILD, INSANE, KEEP SECRETS
GREENS	STRONG, STUBBORN, HIDEBOUND	COWARDLY, SNEAKY, SECRET-KEEPERS	PROTECTORS, FAMILY, PURIFIERS

So the Blues think the Greens are Wild, Insane, and Keep Secrets. It's a simple enough chart, but by looking at those points of interaction, it can be a strong driver or play, or an easy way to answer questions of "what's the response to that?"



REPUTATION AS A SESSION DRIVER

So, let's pull back to a very abstract level and look at the situation behind every session of play. There are lots of forms this can take, but the most common is a simple threefold model composed of these elements:

A **need** is present, and often is the most obvious driver of play. This can take many forms—a need for resources, a need for safety, a need to change minds—whatever it is, it's something that drives people's actions.

Or it would, were it not for the **obstacle**, the reason the need has not already been fulfilled. This obstacle probably represents the meat of play, as it's filled with all the things we classically think of as opposition, but framing it as an obstacle allows us to realize that it can be prejudice or tradition just as easily as it can be a bunch of monsters.

The last factor is the **catalyst**, the reason why all of this matters right now. It might be an external force entering play (perhaps the arrival of the characters), it might be something time sensitive (winter is coming!) or it might be some triggering event. This often seems like the least necessary leg, especially if the need and obstacle are particularly clear cut, but its absence can make a situation fall rather flat.¹

Now, as you think about these things, do so with a list of the local reputation on hand, and see if you can find one driver that aligns with a perception. Let's use the example of the civilized stretch of cars where Conductors are perceived as HELPFUL, RELIABLE and HORRIBLY OLD FASHIONED.

If the **need** is tied to something that the conductors usually do (deliver the mail, say), then the **obstacle** is a threat to their reliability. If the **obstacle** is resistance to changing tradition, then the perception of the conductors as old fashioned plays right to that. If the **catalyst** is an immediate danger, then there's an expectation that the conductors will be helpful.

Whichever perception you zero in on is considered to be “in play” for the duration of this particular arc, whether over a single session or multiple ones. It's a theme for you to keep in mind as you work on the adventure.

Sometimes a situation may suggest more than one perception as appropriate. This isn't bad, and you might want to start out the session undecided on which to go with, waiting to see which way your players jump. But unless the two perceptions are interestingly complementary, you're better off picking one and hitting it rather than diluting things with two (unless you really like juggling).

1 This is totally a simplification of course. Most games are actual multiple layers sets of triads like this, sometimes with other elements in play like obfuscation, distraction on so on. But it's a good foundation.

HITTING THE THEME

It's easy to say "this is a theme" but actually implementing it isn't quite so straightforward.

The first step is to take the idea out of context and examine it on its own terms. Ideally we want to come up with a handful (4–6) of ideas that are tied to the core idea. There are a few questions you can ask that might suggest options, like:

- What's the opposite of this idea?
- What's the best form of this idea?
- What's the worst or most corrupted version of this idea?
- What are the physical items associated with this idea?
- Is this idea tied to any particular place?

Kick it around, brainstorm a bit, and see what kind of list you come up with. If the list is too long, that's a good thing, since it gives you some disposable options. Each one is a potential seed for a scene or element in play.

Let's say we're zeroing in on Reliability. Separated from the conductors, it's applicable to both people and equipment, so we have two potential vectors to explore. If we invert it, we have unreliability, which diverges just as easily as reliability does. That's a good start, but needs some seasoning.

Corrupting reliability gets some interesting possibilities—predictability or getting stuck in a rut. Thinking about this in terms of trains running on time, gets us a little fascism too, which might be too big, but it's an interesting piece. There's probably a little bit less meat in the positive direction because most of the default meanings are pretty positive. In terms of people and places, I'm struck by the thoughts of mailmen, schedules and clocks.

Once you have those seeds, it can sometimes feel a little daunting to turn them into "good" scenes, but that is an easily avoided trap. Once you have the seeds, think *only* in terms of those seeds. When you introduce the mail as a plot element, do not think "*How can I introduce the mail in a way that reflects reliability?*", just think about the mail.

The instinct to overthink is understandable. If we can construct rich themes and layers of meanings, shouldn't we do that? Yes we should—to a point. If you've ever had one of those annoying professors who ran on so long about the symbolism in a novel that it sucked all the joy out of the actual story, then you have firsthand experience with what we're looking to avoid. If you draw your seeds from the themes, then just use those seeds, and the themes will reincorporate themselves naturally.

CHANGING REPUTATION

These elements of reputation should not be static. Just as a reputation may vary from place to place, it can also change as a result of actions in play.

It's entirely possible to make these changes mechanical—treat them as aspects and treat an entire session of play as a single roll of the dice. If you really want to do that, the easiest thing is to pick the four “beats” (the scenes with the most meaning) and judge their outcomes as positive, negative or neutral, and just make it a big create advantage action.²

More satisfying, however, is to make it part of advancement, and to draw in the players. There is almost certainly more nuance in your play than any roll of the dice could reflect, so use that to your advantage. When a session reaches an appropriate milestone, simply lay down in front of the players which element of reputation was in play and discuss the outcome. In a perfect world, you could just discuss how to change it, but the reality is that players often want a little bit of structure to underscore their sense of accomplishment. As such, you as a GM can give the outcome a rating, and the players may take actions based on that.

Outcome	Result	Players May
++	Embody	Rename the reputation to emphasize it OR alter a different reputation element in the direction of this reputation
+	Reinforce	Rename the reputation to emphasize it
■	Represent	No change
=	Subvert	Rename the reputation to weaken it
==	Deny	Rename the reputation to weaken it OR Invert the reputation

2 McKee’s “Story” or Laws’ “Hamlet’s Hit Points” offer some very useful insights into thinking of scenes in this fashion.

REPUTATION AND CONFLICT



Things might be pretty straightforward when you and your friends come into a new area and take actions to improve the reputation of your group, but what happens when someone else is looking to **harm** your reputation, or use it against you? Obviously, opponents may use a bad reputation against you, like any other aspect, but what about besmirching your good name?

If you have characters in conflict over the state of a reputation, then you definitely want to use “beat” resolution (see above). In the case of NPC opposition, then the GM should declare certain scenes to be beats before they are resolved. These scenes will either be initiated by NPC action or be a result of NPC success. In effect, the NPC becomes an active force for **testing** the PCs reputation, and explicitly pushing towards particular outcomes.

If players have conflicting goals regarding the reputation, then encourage them to call those out at appropriate points in a scene (either at framing or as things are getting critical, but not after things have been resolved). A player can basically say “I want to do X to get Y result” and if X happens, then they effectively claim the result of that beat – effectively scoring a point. If they fail, then the “score” for the beat goes onto the GM’s ledger to distribute as appropriate.

When it comes time to resolve, each agenda will have some number of beats in its favor. The GM can assign any points in reserve among agendas as she wishes, even creating new agendas. To resolve these all can be very simple – if there is no agreement on the impact of the beats, then each agenda’s beats cancel out. If one agenda has more beats than the rest, it can choose the outcome, basically turning the number of beats it still holds into an outcome on the table above, positively or negatively as appropriate.

The catch is that agendas can pool their efforts. If two agendas can agree on a change to the reputation that fulfills both their agendas, they can pool their beats before resolution. The GM is included in this, and GM distribution of beats allows a means to steer outcomes.

Unless you limit the number of “claimed” beat scenes (to, say, one per player) you run the risk of having a lot more than 4 beats, even after some have been cancelled out. If that happens, the GM is entitled to limit reputation changes to a single step (effectively a  or a  result) unless **all** players pool their agendas, and have the most beats.




However matters are resolved, it is still appropriate to “cement” the changes at a milestone.

AUTHORITY

Authority is often implicit in a role, and it can provide specific benefits to a character in places where that authority is respected. People will answer questions from a policeman that they would never answer from a stranger, but there are also things they won't talk about with a policeman.

If a player is in a situation where their authority is recognized and respected, then it gives a bonus to most social interactions where the character is speaking from their role as an authority holder. However, if the character is in a situation where their authority is resented or rejected, they take a penalty to most interactions.

The exact amount of bonus or penalty depends upon the context and the personality of the people involved. Context is usually situational—some locations or situations may have a greater or poorer respect for authority, such as the “NICE PART OF TOWN” when contrasted with the slums. It can also be situational—when the authority has a large physical presence, it tends to carry more weight than when it's remote. Personality is exactly what it sounds like—people have different personal relationships with authority.

Each of those axes can be considered its own fate die, producing a ,  or , and the total bonus/penalty depends upon the combination. So a law abiding (+1) citizen in a nice part of town (+1) grants a +2 bonus to police interactions, while a career criminal (-1 personality) in a dark alley (-1) hands out a -2 penalty.

For mechanical purposes, all authority is basically equal. A soldier may care about the difference between a captain and a colonel, but to someone outside, they're all soldiers, and that's the basis for their authority.

USING AUTHORITY

In order to use Authority the character must have trappings which are recognized. This may be as simple as a badge or as complicated as a full uniform. Whatever the bona fides, once the character has established their authority, then they use that Authority for all interactions where it's appropriate.

This is, obviously, double edged. In places where the authority is poorly respected, this can be a real handicap, but once you've asserted authority, you're largely stuck with it. To do otherwise requires a create advantage action to create an aspect like “JUST A BLOKE” to establish a human connection. Actual social skills can be used to do this, but it takes time, and it tends to undermine future uses of authority.

ABUSING AND EXTENDING AUTHORITY

It is also not always clear when authority is really applicable to a situation. This is as it should be—such things are never quite as clear cut as we would like them to be, and one of the hallmarks of abuse of authority is to extend it beyond its bounds. Mechanically, this most often happens when a character uses authority in a context where it doesn't apply (+0) on a person who respects the authority in question (+1).

The consequences of this tend to depend a lot on the specific authority, and may even be nonexistent. But it's worth keeping an eye on as a GM, as it can provide some wonderful hooks in play.

TYPES OF AUTHORITY

It is entirely possible to mechanically track every type of authority in a game (and doing so might paint a very interesting picture) but in practice, you should limit it to the authority that matters. This will usually be only a single type, or two types if they are explicitly in conflict (as might be the case in a Police vs. Crime game).

GMING AUTHORITY

There will be situations where it will be great to have and situations where it will be an anchor around the players' necks. At first glance, it seems like it's just an interesting way to complicate interactions with a community, but its real purpose is as something to force decisions out of players. It's easy to wear a badge in a place where that badge elicits respect, but what do you do when that badge earns you contempt and trouble?

AUTHORITY, REPUTATION, AND THE CONDUCTORS

How does all of this turn into a play model? When it comes time to create a new session in a new length of the train, then this is how to sketch out the bones in a way that drives play and allows mechanical engagement. By laying out the reputation of the conductors, figuring out how much their authority is respected, and using the reputation to build a situation, you have all the pieces necessary for some serious play and, more importantly, all the tools necessary to allow that play to be reflected in changes to the setting.