

Castle  
Falkenstein

# THE ABILITY VARIATIONS

NEW WAYS TO CUSTOMIZE THE GREAT GAME



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### DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

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*Honestly, Mike, I should have seen it coming. Back in your world there's a tendency to associate house rules with roleplaying games but the concept is as old as gaming itself. Just look at whist, the most popular card game here in New Europa! There's bid whist, Boston whist, hearts whist, knock-out whist, and more! Travel to five different cities and chances are you'll end up playing five different variations of whist. Heck, duels have been fought over the right to decide which rules to play with!*

*So, it should come as no surprise that as soon as I published the Great Game over here people began developing their own house rules. In my travels around the world as part of my job as an Agent of the Second Compact I've run into hundreds of these variations. Some made sense and some didn't, and at least one required the assistance of a Babbage Engine to implement! I've collected some of my favorites and sent them over to you via Faerie Express. I hope you enjoy.*

Tom Olam



## THE SPECIALIZATIONS VARIATION

*This particular house rule was suggested to me by none other than Dom Pedro II, the Emperor of Brazil. Being both well educated and well traveled, His Highness noticed how generalized the various Abilities in the game are. This was done on purpose, of course, to keep the rules simple and to reflect the broadness of a standard New European education, but Dom Pedro II felt there should be a way for a Dramatic Character to excel in one aspect of an Ability if their Dramatic Character's background warranted it.*

*"After all, Thomas," His Highness said to me, "A sailor might know several languages due to his travels around the world and yet still have never set foot in a classroom."*

*What can I say? When an Emperor is right, he's right!*

In games utilizing the Specializations Variation, Players can elect to have their Dramatic Characters focus on certain areas ruled over by an Ability. For example, a hunter might possess an Average Marksmanship when it comes to most firearms but due to training and practice have a Good Marksmanship when shooting a rifle.

During character creation a Player can trade in one of their Good or Great Abilities in order to purchase Specializations for their Dramatic Character. The Player receives a number of Specializations equal to one half the value of the traded Ability; so a Good Ability is worth three Specializations and a Great Ability is worth four Specializations.

Hosts and Players of *Castle Falkenstein* should remember the Golden Rule of Gaming is the only one which must be followed when playing.

*"Don't use a rule if it makes the game less fun."*

The rule variants presented in this document are optional ways to customize the Great Game to suit the play style of a group. They are not required and shouldn't be used unless the group agrees they will improve the game for everyone.

Your humble servant.

J Gray

Specializations can be applied to any Ability, including those for which a Dramatic Character possesses a Poor or Average Rank. A Specialization increases the value of the Ability by one step when performing a Feat for which it applies. Players can purchase multiple Specializations for the same Ability but cannot select the same Specialization for an Ability twice.

For example, Lucus has decided he will be playing Professor Harold Doyle, an expert in matters spiritual and ghostly. As he determines what Professor Doyle's Abilities will be, Lucus elects to trade in one of his four Good Abilities for three Specializations. His initial Ability choices are:

**Poor:** Charisma

**Good:** Courage, Perception, Physician (Remember, he only receives three Goods because he traded one for three Specializations)

**Great:** Education

Lucus next decides what his three Specializations will be. He selects the following:

- Ghosts for Charisma. Professor Doyle is more adroit at speaking to the dead than he is the living. His Charisma is considered Average when dealing with ghosts.
- Spiritualism for Education. While Professor Doyle is a learned man he is especially knowledgeable about matters involving the ethereal. His Education is considered Exceptional in this regard.
- Mediumship for Sorcery. Professor Doyle will never be able to cast spells but he is highly attuned to the spiritual and can vaguely perceive normally invisible ghosts. His Sorcery is considered Good when attempting to sense the spiritual.

New Specializations can be acquired after character generation using the methods detailed in the Improving Your Lot rules found in *Castle Falkenstein*.

The following chart lists possible Specializations for each Ability as well as the Ability's Suit, Tarot Suit (if using *The Second Tarot Variation*), and book of origin. Players are free to suggest their own Specializations for an Ability but the Host should always have final authority on what is and is not allowed. As a guideline, always pick a Specialization that helps tell a Dramatic Character's story, not one designed to give them the best chance at succeeding at a given Feat.



| Ability          | Suit     | Tarot Suit | Book of Origin | Specializations  |
|------------------|----------|------------|----------------|--|
| Animal Handling  | Clubs    | Wands      | CC             | Befriending, a Specific Type of Creature, Training                             |
| Animal Speech    | Hearts   | Cups       | CC             | A Specific Type of Creature  |
| Athletics        | Clubs    | Wands      | CF             | Climbing, Riding, Swimming, Thrown Weapons                                     |
| Charisma         | Hearts   | Cups       | CF             | Children, Crowds, Middle Class   |
| Comeliness       | Hearts   | Cups       | CF             | Cosmetics, Cuteness, Seduction, Wardrobe                                       |
| Connections      | Spades   | Swords     | CF             | Criminals, Merchants, Nobility, Politicians                                    |
| Courage          | Hearts   | Cups       | CF             | Intimidation, Resisting Fear, Resisting Physical Pain                          |
| Craftsmanship    | Diamonds | Pentacles  | CiF            | Dressmaking, Potting, Jeweling, Woodcarving                                    |
| Creature Power   | Spades   | Swords     | CC             | A Specific Type of Target  |
| Education        | Diamonds | Pentacles  | CF             | History, Languages, Sciences, A Specific Field of Study                        |
| Etherealness     | Spades   | Swords     | CF             | Disguise, Flight, Passing Through Objects                                      |
| Etherealness     | Clubs    | Wands      | AoF            | Flight, Passing Through Objects  |
| Exchequer        | Spades   | Swords     | CF             | Cash on Hand, Credit, Estate Value, Worth in a Specific Country                |
| Fencing          | Clubs    | Wands      | CF             | Dueling, Feints, Rapier, Saber   |
| Fisticuffs       | Clubs    | Wands      | CF             | Attack, Defense, Found Weapons, Prize Fighting                                 |
| Gambling         | Diamonds | Pentacles  | CiF            | Bluffing, Casinos, Cheating, Horse Racing                                      |
| Glamour          | Hearts   | Cups       | CF/AoF         | Auditory Glamours, Glamours of Objects, Glamours of People, Visual Glamours    |
| Kindred Powers   | Clubs    | Wands      | CF             | A Specific Type of Target  |
| Kindred Powers   | Diamonds | Pentacles  | AoF            | A Specific Type of Target  |
| Invention        | Diamonds | Pentacles  | CiF            | Clockwork, Gadgettech, Vehicles, Weaponry                                      |
| Helmsmanship     | Diamonds | Pentacles  | CF             | Aeronautics, Land Vehicles, Lighter than Aircraft, Nautical Vehicles           |
| Gunslinging      | Clubs    | Wands      | SS             | Fastdraw, Showdowns, Trick Shots   |
| Leadership       | Hearts   | Cups       | CiF            | Business, Combat, Politics, Speeches   |
| Marksmanship     | Clubs    | Wands      | CF             | Bows, Pistols, Rifles, Shotguns  |
| Mesmerism        | Hearts   | Cups       | CiF            | Befuddlement, Implanting Suggestions, Resisting Hypnosis                       |
| Motoring         | Clubs    | Wands      | CiF            | Automotives, Racing, Velocipedes   |
| Natural Sciences | Diamonds | Pentacles  | CiF            | Botany, Electricity, Physics, Zoology  |
| Outdoorsmanship  | Diamonds | Pentacles  | CC             | Hunting, Tracking, Survival  |
| Perception       | Diamonds | Pentacles  | CF             | Combat Readiness, Empathy, A Specific Sense                                    |
| Performance      | Hearts   | Cups       | CF             | Dancing, Drama, Singing, Stage Magic   |
| Physician        | Diamonds | Pentacles  | CF             | Diagnosis, Chemistry, Medical Knowledge, Surgery                               |
| Physique         | Clubs    | Wands      | CF             | Bodybuilding Poses, Breaking Objects, Lifting                                  |
| Poison           | Clubs    | Wands      | CC             | A Specific Type of Target  |
| Renown           | Spades   | Swords     | SS             | A Specific Country or Territory, Showdowns                                     |
| Riding           | Clubs    | Wands      | CiF            | Camels, Griffons, Horses, Racing   |
| Social Graces    | Spades   | Swords     | CF             | Dancing, Etiquette in a Specific Country, Knowledge of Peerage, Party Planning |

|                       |          |           |     |   |
|-----------------------|----------|-----------|-----|---|
| Shapeshifting         | Clubs    | Wands     | AoF | Details of Shape, Disguise, Time Spent in Shape           |
| Sorcerous Engineering | Diamonds | Pentacles | LN  | A Specific Type of Sorcerous Engine                       |
| Sorcery               | Diamonds | Pentacles | CF  | Magickal Lore, Magickal Perception, A Specific Lore Book  |
| Stealth               | Clubs    | Wands     | CF  | Picking Locks, Picking Pockets, Sleight of Hand, Sneaking |
| Tinkering             | Diamonds | Pentacles | CF  | Babbage Engines, Clockwork, Repairs, Vehicles             |

AoF = *The Memoirs of Auberon of Faerie*

CC = *Curious Creatures*

CiF = *Comme il Faut*

CF = *Castle Falkenstein*

LN = *The Lost Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*

SS = *Sixguns and Sorcery*

The Specialization Variation is compatible both with the original rules as presented in *Castle Falkenstein* and the Fearful Harm & Great Danger rules from *Comme il Faut*.

**Note:** Etherealness and Kindred Powers are listed twice on the above chart because they are explained in both the original *Castle Falkenstein* and in *The Memoirs of Auberon of Faerie* with notable differences. Glamour is also explained in both books but with no appreciable difference between the two and so it is only listed once.

## THE DIVORCE VARIATION

*This variation comes from a bit closer to home. I was Hosting a session of the Great Game with my usual group when Morrolan, who was playing a world-class athlete at the time, announced his Dramatic Character's intention to bully a guard into abandoning his post. Deciding this would be a Courage versus Courage Feat, I naturally asked him if he had any Hearts, the suit governing the Courage Ability, to play.*

*"Honestly, Thomas," Morrolan began, in exactly the same tone I've heard Sherlock Holmes use when pointing out some obscure observation he believes everyone should have noticed, "I am not using merely my force of personality to frighten this poor soul but my amazing muscles as well. I would argue I should be able to play a Club to represent the physicality of the attempt."*

*Which, of course, meant he didn't have any Hearts to play. Still, he had a point.*

In the rules as written, each Ability is governed by a playing card Suit. When attempting a Feat involving

an Ability, cards of the governing Suit add their full value while cards from the other three Suits only increase the total by 1.

As a reminder, Clubs (or Wands if you are using *The Second Tarot Variation*) govern physical activities, Diamonds (Pentacles) govern mental and intellectual activities, Hearts (Cups) govern emotional and romantic activities, and Spades (Swords) govern social and status-related activities.

When utilizing the Divorce Variation, Abilities are no longer firmly tied to their governing Suits. Instead, when attempting a Feat, Players are allowed to make an argument for using cards of another Suit to enhance an Ability. The Player must be able to articulate why the Suit they are proposing better fits the action they are attempting than the Suit which normally governs the Ability. If the Host accepts the argument, the Player is allowed to play cards of the proposed Suit in the place of the Suit which normally governs the Ability. The Host is the final arbitrator on the matter and always has the option of not agreeing with the Player's argument.

When deciding to use the Divorce Variation, a Host should choose one of the following options to determine the value of a card from a proposed Suit.

## FIRST OPTION: HALF VALUE

Cards from the proposed Suit are worth one half their full value, rounded down. Hosts wishing to allow Players more options without slowing the game down by turning every Feat into an argument over Suits should choose this option. It interjects some flexibility into *Castle Falkenstein* while still retraining elements of card playing strategy. Playing a card from a Suit which governs the Ability being used will always be preferable.

For example, Professor Doyle is attempting to drive away a ghost by thrusting at it with a cane covered in sea salt, a known deterrent of the supernatural. The Host announces this is a Fencing Feat, which would normally be governed by Clubs. The Professor's player, Lucus, argues this is more a contest of wills than a physical one, despite the cane and proposes Hearts would be more appropriate. The Host thinks about it and agrees. Lucus plays the 10 of Hearts which adds 5 to his Fencing of Average (which has a value of 4) for a total of 9.

## SECOND OPTION: FULL VALUE

Cards from the proposed Suit are worth their full value. Hosts wishing to allow Players complete freedom to mix and match Suits with Abilities should choose this option. It provides excellent opportunities for storytelling on the part of the Players by encouraging them to describe how a proposed Suit better fits their attempted action in dramatic detail.

For example, Professor Doyle is attempting to drive away a ghost by thrusting at it with a cane covered in sea salt, a known deterrent of the supernatural. The Host announces this is a Fencing Feat, which would

The Divorce Variation is compatible with the original rules as presented in *Castle Falkenstein* and the Fearful Harm & Great Danger rules from *Comme il Faut*.

normally be governed by Clubs. The Professor's player, Lucus, argues this is more a contest of wills than a physical one, despite the cane and proposes Hearts would be more appropriate. The Host thinks about it and agrees. Lucus plays the 10 of Hearts which adds 10 to his Fencing of Average (which has a value of 4) for a total of 14.

No matter which option the Host chooses, cards from Suits other than the Proposed Suit have a value of 1 when resolving the Feat. This includes the Suit which normally governs the Ability. If Morrolan successfully argues Clubs should be used instead of Hearts for his intimidation attempt his 3 of Hearts has a value of 1 and not 3 when resolving the Feat.

## THE IMPROVEMENT VARIATION

*I've always loved the idea of games as an educational and therapeutic tool so I was delighted when I met a school teacher in Paris who used the Great Game as a regular part of her curriculum. Of course, she found she had to tailor the game for her audience and goals.*

*"We use journals, of course," she explained to me as we walked together along the Seine, "Doing so promotes improvements in penmanship and expression. When it comes to improvement of their Dramatic Characters, however, I find your journal system to be too vague and so invented a new one. The children need firm goals, segmented into measurable steps, in order to guide them. A set of resolutions, if you will, which earn them currency when completed. This currency can then be spent to purchase improvements to their Abilities."*

*The variation my school teacher friend devised blends the “write about it in your journal” idea I presented in Castle Falkenstein with a traditional Experience Point system and I found it quite elegant. I’m reproducing it here more or less as she described it to me.*

In this variation, a Player raises their Dramatic Character’s Abilities by spending Improvement Points. These Improvement Points are earned both by playing through Adventure Entertainments and by undertaking specific acts of self-improvement known as Resolutions.

## IMPROVEMENT POINTS AND ADVENTURE ENTERTAINMENTS

To determine how many Improvement Points a Dramatic Character earns during an Adventure Entertainment the Host should first break it down into a series of deeds. Deeds are important waypoints in the Adventure Entertainment which must be passed in order for the Dramatic Characters to reach the finale. Put another way, if an Adventure Entertainment were a trip across New Europa deeds would be the most important stops made along the way.

To determine an Adventure Entertainment’s deeds, a Host should look at their notes and identify the waypoints. Hosts should always consider which waypoints must be passed but never the specific methods by which Dramatic Characters should pass them. They should also be prepared to change a deed if the party veers off in an unexpected direction. Deeds should never be about locking Players into a specific course of action.

Hosts looking to simplify the matter can decide the Dramatic Characters have accomplished a deed whenever they complete one of the Adventure Entertainment’s acts.

As an example: Marianne has written a murder mystery for her first turn as Host. She reads through her notes and determines this particular Adventure

Entertainment has four major waypoints which can serve as deeds. The Dramatic Characters will have completed a deed when they examine the crime scene, when they question some or all of the suspects, when they perform follow-up investigations, and when they unmask the murderer.

Each deed completed in an Adventure Entertainment is worth 1 Improvement Point. Depending on the actions of the Dramatic Characters it might be possible to complete an Adventure Entertainment without completing all possible deeds.

## IMPROVEMENT POINTS AND RESOLUTIONS

Outside of Adventure Entertainment, Dramatic Characters can earn Improvement Points by undertaking specific acts known as Resolutions.

Resolutions begin with a statement involving some goal the Dramatic Character wishes to accomplish. A good Resolution can be definitively completed, cannot be accomplished quickly or simply, and requires effort and action on the part of the Dramatic Character. The following are examples of well crafted Resolutions.

“I resolve to gain renown across the continent as a performer on the stage.”

“I resolve to bring my brother’s killer to justice.”

“I resolve to prove myself worthy and be knighted by the Queen.”

“I resolve to step foot on each of the five continents.”

“I resolve to become one of the wealthiest people in the world.”

“I resolve to visit Paris” and “I resolve to drive an automotive” are examples of poor Resolutions because they are too easily accomplished by most Dramatic Characters, can be accomplished fairly quickly, or require little effort compared to the Resolutions above.



Every Dramatic Character should have at least one Resolution. Hosts have the final say on how many Resolutions a Dramatic Character is allowed but a maximum of three is recommended. Any more than three per Dramatic Character tends to create too many competing plotlines in the party's story and opens the gates to a flood of Improvement Points instead of a manageable, steady trickle.

Like Adventure Entertainments, Resolutions are broken down into a series of deeds which help measure progress towards the fulfillment of a Dramatic Character's stated goal. Players and Hosts should work together to set a series of firm deeds whose success can be easily measured. Each Resolution should have between three and five deeds.

For example, the Resolutions presented above can be broken down into deeds as follows:

**"I resolve to gain renown across the continent as a performer on the stage."**

- First Deed: Obtain a speaking part in a major stage production in a capital city.
- Second Deed: Obtain a lead role in a major stage production of a Shakespearean play in a capital city.
- Third Deed: Be lauded as a performer on the front page of a major metropolitan newspaper.

**"I resolve to bring my brother's killer to justice."**

- First Deed: Obtain access to the police report on my brother's death.
- Second Deed: Identify my brother's killer.
- Third Deed: Track down and capture my brother's killer.
- Fourth Deed: Be present as my brother's killer is convicted for their crime.

**"I resolve to prove myself worthy and be knighted by the Queen."**

- First Deed: Perform a deed of bravery so great it is noted by major newspapers.
- Second Deed: Be invited to and join a Social Club or Salon which counts a royal personage as a member.
- Third Deed: Kneel before the Queen as she bestows upon me the honor of knighthood.

**"I resolve to step foot on each of the five continents."**

- First Deed: Travel to North America.
- Second Deed: Travel to South America.
- Third Deed: Travel to Asia.
- Fourth Deed: Travel to Africa.
- Fifth Deed: Travel to Australia, even though some do not consider it a continent.

**"I resolve to become one of the wealthiest people in the world."**

- First Deed: Through toil and sweat, raise my Exchequer to Average.
- Second Deed: Through adventure and exploration, raise my Exchequer to Good.
- Third Deed: Through continued application of my abilities, raise my Exchequer to Great.
- Fourth Deed: Through careful investment, raise my Exchequer to Exceptional.
- Fifth Deed: Through cleverness and skill, raise my Exchequer to Extraordinary.

Deeds can be completed either through actions taken during game play or, with the permission of the Host, through actions documented in journal entries which take place in the downtime between sessions of the campaign.

Dramatic Characters earn 1 Improvement Point for each deed they complete and deeds need not be completed in any specific order. Finishing a Resolution

is done by completing each of that Resolution's deeds and is worth 2 additional Improvement Points. When a Dramatic Character finishes a Resolution they have the option of creating a new one. Dramatic Characters should always have at least one unfinished Resolution to work towards.

## ALTERING RESOLUTIONS

With a Host's permission, Players can make alterations to a Resolution when they complete a deed. After all, Resolutions represent roadmaps through time and those can be tricky to plot out in advance. A Player should never change the core statement of a Resolution ("I resolve...") but can work with the Host in changing remaining deeds to reflect new information learned or new realities discovered. In the most extreme of cases, Players can choose to abandon a Resolution entirely but only if there are good and valid reasons for doing so. A Dramatic Character cannot bring their brother's killer to justice, for example, if it turns out their brother is actually still alive. Dramatic Characters gain no Improvement Points for any unfinished deeds in an abandoned Resolution but may craft a replacement with the help of the Host.

## SPENDING IMPROVEMENT POINTS

Once earned, Improvement Points can be spent to improve a Dramatic Character's Abilities. If the Specialization Variation is being used, Improvement Points can also be used to purchase new Specializations. Existing Specializations cannot be improved. They are always considered to be one step better than the Ability they are attached to.

The cost of improving Abilities and purchasing Specializations depends on how quickly the Host wishes a party to grow in skill and aptitude.

## FIRST OPTION: SLOW GROWTH

Campaigns which meet regularly might do best with slow growth over time. With this option, the cost of improvement is as follows.

| Improvement                 | Improvement Point Cost   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Raising an Ability          | A number of Improvement Points equal to the Ability's new value. |
| Purchasing a Specialization | 6 Improvement Points   |

For example, Professor Doyle has earned a total of 10 Improvement Points. His player, Lucus, is tired of the Professor being tongue-tied when around the living due to his Poor Charisma and wishes to raise it to Average. He spends 4 Improvement Points (the value of an Average Ability) to raise it, leaving him with 6. After some thought, Lucus decides Professor Doyle is more comfortable speaking to fellow academics than the average person and spends those 6 Improvement Points on an "Academics" Specialization for his Charisma.

## SECOND OPTION: FAST GROWTH

Hosts of shorter campaigns or campaigns which meet infrequently might prefer a faster progression of Abilities. With this option, the cost of improvement is as follows.

| Improvement                 | Improvement Point Cost   |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Raising an Ability          | A number of Improvement Points equal to the Ability's current value. |
| Purchasing a Specialization | 3 Improvement Points   |

For example, Professor Doyle has earned a total of 10 Improvement Points. His player, Lucus, is tired of the Professor being tongue-tied when around the

The Improvement Variation is compatible both with the original rules as presented in *Castle Falkenstein* and the Fearful Harm & Great Danger rules from *Comme il Faut*.

living due to his Poor Charisma and wishes to raise it to Average. He spends 2 Improvement Points (the value of his current Charisma Rank of Poor) to raise it, leaving him with 8. After some thought, Lucus decides Professor Doyle is more comfortable speaking to fellow academics than the average person and spends 3 Improvement Points on an “Academics” Specialization for his Charisma. Professor Doyle has 5 Improvement Points remaining for future use.

## JUSTIFYING IMPROVEMENT

In the original rules, improvement of Abilities occurs utilizing a “record it in your journal” system. Using that system, the Player identifies which Ability they wish to improve, works with the Host to determine parameters for improvement, and then writes about how the improvement is taking place. The system is abstract but creative and gives excellent opportunities for storytelling.

Improvement Points, on the other hand, are a more solid and mathematically based system which, by themselves, do not require justification to raise the Rank of an Ability. Improvement becomes simpler and less time consuming but also potentially less creative.

Hosts who wish to have the best of both worlds can use Improvement Points to track growth but require solid proof, through journal entries and game play, that an Ability is being properly exercised and improved before allowing any points to be spent. This fusion of the two systems allows for both creativity and precision in improvement.

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