

DROPS IN A POND: MASS CONFLICT OPTIONS

Written by Leonard Balsera • Edited by John Adamus • Layout by Fred Hicks

The following is an official FATE CORE rules supplement, created for Jeffrey Fuller as part of a FATE CORE Kickstarter commission.

By default, FATE CORE tends to concentrate on the actions of individual characters pursuing goals. However, you might find yourself in a position where the PCs are integrated into large armies, either as commanders or as elite members of the rank and file.

Here are some ways to handle that.

ARMIES AS BACKGROUND

The simplest method is to focus only on the smaller moments that the PCs have in the overall battle, such as a fight with a nemesis or a key moment where they can turn the tide. This doesn't require anything more than creative narration on your part and the use of the standard conflict rules, perhaps with some flavorful situation aspects if the armies do something that could affect the PCs' immediate environment, such as MORTAR FIRE or the like. Do this when the armies are more window dressing than anything else and you want to keep the spotlight consistent.

ARMIES AS CHARACTERS

If you want to take the bird's eye view, you can also make the army units themselves into characters, adapting some of the rules from the Extras chapter. Give the unit aspects reflecting key features or personnel, skills broadly abstracted to represent the capabilities of the fighting force (so a platoon armed with rifles gets a Shoot skill, a very mobile platoon gets an Athletics skill, etc.), and stunts to represent any special training or other advantages they may have (a cavalry unit might get +2 to Fight from horseback).

Each unit for a side should be one character. One army vs. one army is kind of boring, and that gives you the option for different players to control different units.

Then, give the players control over the units on their side (or on whichever side they want to support if the PCs are sitting this out) and use the normal conflict system, but with everything "zoomed out". Zones become whole regions of the battlefield, like the North Bridge or the opponent's camp site. Situation aspects reflect developing elements of the tactical situation, like BARRICADE LINE or SURROUNDED UNITS. If their PCs are fighting in the unit, apply teamwork bonuses to the relevant skills. (That seems like a pretty big influence, I know, but your PCs are the stars of this show! It's all right to play a little loose with the realism factor there.)

Do this when you want to give the PCs a sense of a larger world operating around them and quickly resolve large-scale events.

DROPS IN A POND

For huge set-piece battles that you want to make a really dynamic part of your game, you're going to have to integrate these two approaches, zooming in and out of focus at different points throughout the battle. You want to have the spotlight on the PCs at times for critical moments, followed by zooming out to show how those moments influence the larger progress of the battle as a whole.

This is the de facto way that war movies handle that one big battle in the second or third act. If you've seen *Braveheart* or *The Two Towers*, you know what I mean. (If you haven't, stop reading this and go watch them.)

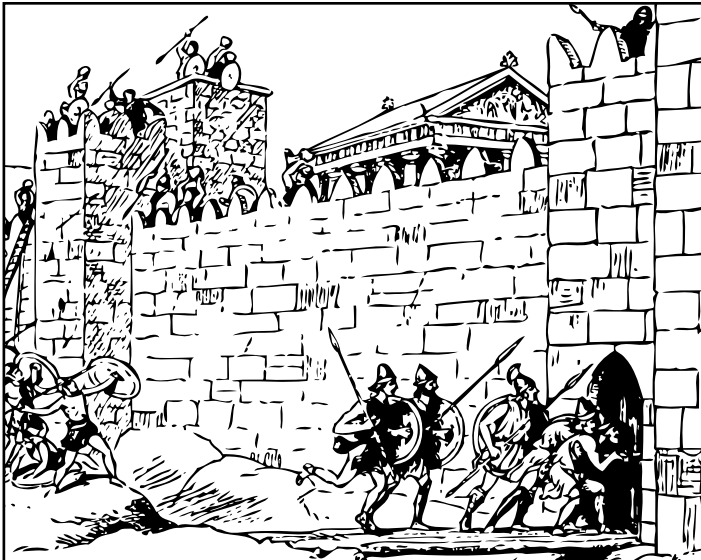
SETTING UP THE CONFLICT

To start, set up the scene the same way you would an "Armies As Characters" scene. Make stats for your units and lay out the zones on the battlefield, place your initial situation aspects, and get the sides situated.

Then, think about what moments might make good instances to zoom in on the PCs and give them the spotlight. We'll call these **flashpoints**. You want to have a list of two or three flashpoints when you start the battle, though it's probable you'll have several more when you actually hit the ground running.

Good ideas for flashpoints are:

- Confrontations with any named rival NPCs, if they're on the opposing side, especially if one of your PCs has an aspect pertaining to that rivalry.
- Critical situational turning points for the battle, like capturing a certain objective or resource.
- Smaller goals orthogonal to the outcome of the battle.



RUNNING THE CONFLICT

Decide if you want to start with one of your flashpoints or with the broader clash between armies. Think like a movie director. Do you want the sweeping, establishing shot of the battle before you zoom in, or do you want to start with your stars *in medias res* and then pull back to show the magnitude of what's at stake?

Either way, at the end of every exchange, think about whether it's a good idea to transition. If it makes sense that the next thing to do is trigger a flashpoint, do so, and run exchanges with the PCs until that flashpoint is resolved. If you're at the end of a flashpoint, pull back to the main armies and show how the events within the flashpoint change the overall battle, or just use the opportunity to advance the story of the fight.

Likewise, if a player announces a goal that seems like it could trigger a flashpoint according to the guidelines above, go immediately to that in the next exchange! A really good time to switch is *if a player announces an conflict action on behalf of an army that primarily involves independent action on the part of the character*. (“I want to take that ballista so I can attack the folks coming over the ridge.” “Okay, that'd be like creating an advantage for the lead unit, so that sounds like a good flashpoint.”)

So basically, each flashpoint resolves as a mini-conflict within the larger conflict, where the results of the flashpoint spill out into the larger battle. Check out the example battle below for a sense of how this plays out.

HOW SMALL AFFECTS LARGE

The key to making this work is making sure that the flashpoints have a tangible effect on what the armies do. Otherwise, you're basically just playing out two separate conflicts and not getting a lot of mileage out of the time you're spending.

The best way to look at it is this: *A resolved flashpoint is the equivalent of one exchange for an army, except with a predetermined outcome.*

Also, because it's the PCs, *a resolved flashpoint provides maximum value for the army that benefits, or terrible consequences for the army that suffers.* Look to “success with style” results or stunt effects as an example of how to handle this.

Let's break it down by action type.

ATTACK FLASHPOINTS

To qualify as an attack flashpoint, the overall goal has to be direct damage to the unit, or the flashpoint has to result in direct damage to a unit as a matter of logical consequence. Some ways to accomplish this are:

- Taking out a named NPC or set of NPCs associated with that unit.
- Setting off some kind of boobytrap or siege device.
- Personally taking out a large number of unnamed NPC mobs.
- Gaining control of a significant piece of armament or artillery.

Succeeding at this flashpoint should inflict a *max value hit* on the targeted unit. Take the highest relevant PC skill and call it a +4, and then take the targeted unit's defense skill and call it a -4. Apply stress or consequences as usual.

ADVANTAGE FLASHPOINTS

To qualify as an advantage flashpoint, the overall goal has to be a situational change that gives one unit an advantage over another, or that has to be the most logical result of the flashpoint. Some (and I mean some here, because the possibilities are nearly endless) ways to accomplish this are:

- Restricting the movement of a unit by setting something in the environment on fire.
- Destroying or sabotaging a key resource of the targeted unit.
- Inflicting a loss of morale with crazy, epic heroics.
- Setting off a boobytrap or siege device. (You know how it is. Some boobytraps blind and confuse. Some shred and tear.)

Succeeding at this flashpoint sticks an advantage for the victors onto the targeted unit with two free invocations attached.

OVERCOME FLASHPOINTS

These are the broadest of all the flashpoints, basically a catch-all for whatever goals don't clearly fall in the attack or advantage category. Most of the time, an overcome flashpoint will be a bid to establish a narrative detail that changes the bigger battle somehow, but can't really be qualified as granting an advantage or causing damage.

The most common example of this is when you've established some sort of insurmountable barrier or circumstance that keeps a unit on your side from even trying to accomplish a goal, which you have to remove before you can proceed. The turbolaser towers guarding the Death Star trench in *Star Wars* are a great example of such an obstacle, because the trench attack simply couldn't proceed until those had been whittled down.

You also use overcome flashpoints to clear the way for the movement of a particular unit, eliminating barriers on the battlefield. Basically, any situation aspect on the battle that you want to change or remove requires one, if you want that change to affect whole units.

Succeeding at this flashpoint removes the obstacle or otherwise lets you narrate whatever detail you want into the larger battle. If it's appropriate for some boost to be assigned to any unit on your side, you get that too.

HOW LARGE AFFECTS SMALL

A PC cannot act as an individual against a whole unit outside of a flashpoint. If PCs have to face a unit alone, with no unit to support them, either they have to justify a flashpoint or automatically concede.

RUNNING A FLASHPOINT

Each flashpoint is a full conflict, challenge, or contest scene of its own, set up independently of the larger one. So, zoom in and set up the situation like you would a normal scene for your PCs, taking into account what opposition is in their way, what environmental factors are affecting the PCs, and what the immediate area of the battlefield around them looks like.

If the PCs beat the opposition, allot them the effect listed above for the type of flashpoint. If they are taken out or concede, assign the *opposite* of that effect to them or their allied units. So, if they fail to finish an attack flashpoint, their unit takes a max value hit.

UNITS AND CONCESSION

GMs, you should consider the units you control in a larger battle to be like NPCs, in terms of how long they'll stay in a fight. You shouldn't require every unit to keep pressing until it's taken out unless you want the fight to go a long time.

The units you should keep in action the longest are the ones that have the most aspects and interesting stuff going on, *especially* if that includes an aspected relationship with a PC (something like **Landon Is Our Battlefield Role Model** or **As Long As Zird's Okay, We're Okay**). Non-aspected troops or troops that only have a high concept are made for the meat grinder, like nameless NPCs are, so concede for them as soon as their stress tracks run out or they take one consequence.

Players, if you're controlling a unit, the GM still retains final say over how long they'll keep in the fight. Though, certainly, an overcome flashpoint to rally the troops might be appropriate at a critical moment. (GMs, if a PC has been taken out or forced to concede in a fight, go ahead and let 'em run their unit into the ground.)

EXAMPLE CONFLICT: THE ASSAULT ON THE RED EMPEROR'S FORTRESS

Landon, Cynere, and Zird have been hired by the King of Vorenal to lead forces against a rogue warlord called the Red Emperor, who has been marching forces across the outskirts of Vorenal and conquering every town and village in his path.

The PCs have discovered the location of the Red Emperor's main fortress, a swamp ruin restored to glory by conscripted labor.

Landon and his friends decide to sabotage as much of the defenses as they can before the morning assault.

PC UNITS

The PCs have the following allies:

UNIT: GENERAL EPHON'S COMMANDOS

Aspects: NIMBLE, ELITE FIGHTING FORCE, FEW IN NUMBER

Skills:

Great (+4) Fight

Good(+3) Athletics, Endurance, and Notice

Fair (+2) Stealth

Stunts:

Nimble Positioning: +2 to Stealth to move undetected through an enormous battle

Stress:

UNIT: INFANTRY

Aspects: none

Skills:

Fair (+2) Athletics, Endurance, Fight, and Notice

Stunts: none

Stress:

ENEMY UNITS

The Red Emperor has the following allies:

UNIT: TOWER GUARDS

Aspects: LOYAL UNTO DEATH, SERIOUSLY ARMED AND ARMORED

Skills:

Great (+4) Fight, Notice

Good (+3) Endurance, Athletics

Stunts:

Siege Artists: May use Fight to fire the tower ballistas and attack other units at range.

Stress:

UNIT: THE SORCERER CORPS

Aspects: MAGICAL MIGHT

Skills:

Good (+3) Lore

Fair (+2) Endurance, Will

Average (+1) Fight, Notice, Athletics

Stunts:

Boom: +2 to Lore to cast hostile magic as a ranged attack

Big Badda Boom: Once per conflict, may check off any stress box to attack all enemy units in a single zone.

Stress: Physical , Mental

UNIT: RED TROOPS

Aspects: none

Skills:

Fair (+2) Athletics, Endurance, Fight, and Notice

Stunts: none

Stress:

THE SITUATION

The fortress is buried in swampland, and the PCs' allies are camped at its edge. Amanda decides that a simple SWAMPY TERRAIN aspect will suffice as a barrier to movement, and placed two zones of open land between the camp and the fortress.

In addition, the walls of the fortress itself are FORTIFIED AGAINST INTRUSION and lined with SIEGE TOWERS with ballistae on them. The fortress is also two zones, one for the courtyard and one for the keep itself. The keep itself is RIDDLED WITH TRAPS.

The PCs have snuck into the castle under the cover of darkness to try and sabotage the defenses. The other forces are positioned at their camp when the battle starts.

FLASHPOINTS

Amanda decides that the keep is all but impossible to reach unless the ballistae are sabotaged so that they can't fire on the advancing armies, so she calls that an overcome flashpoint.

The Red Emperor's personal vizier, a terrible necromancer named Kraag, is accompanying the sorcerers, and Amanda decides that taking her out would result in a serious blow to that force. That's an attack flashpoint.

Finally, the battle with the Red Emperor in the keep is an overcome flashpoint that will signal the end of the battle OR the total decimation of Vorendal's troops.

THE BATTLE SEQUENCE

FLASHPOINT: SIEGE TOWER

This battle begins with the siege tower flashpoint, as the PCs try to clear the way for the approach of the troops. Amanda calls for a contest of Stealth between the PCs and the tower guards to determine if the PCs can get in position without being spotted.

The PCs lose! She immediately calls for a conflict with the tower guards. (She just takes the unit stats and runs guard groups as individual mobs for the PCs.) She sketches out quick zones in the tower they got caught in, and runs a normal conflict between the PCs and the guards.

It ends with a mixed bag - Cynere is forced to concede, but a bloodied Landon and Zird carry the day. They decide that they do sabotage the ballistae, but Cynere is taken captive by the guards and rushed to the keep's dungeon.

BATTLE EXCHANGE 1

Now Amanda flashes out to the battle, and gives the PCs command over the troops. Lily takes over Ephon's commandos and Lenny takes over the infantry.

Amanda moves the sorcerers onto the field in this exchange and has them burn their stunt early, which damages the commandos and forces the infantry to take consequences. Lenny responds by sending the infantry to attack the sorcerers, but they don't do any significant damage. Lily makes an overcome action to sneak the commandos over to the keep wall so she can start throwing up ladders and succeeds.

Zird decides that he needs to engage Kraag in single combat and asks for a flashpoint, using his turn to move Zird out into the battlefield.

FLASHPOINT 2: WIZARD'S DUEL

The battle between Zird and Kraag takes four exchanges to play out, but ends with Zird victorious.

This allows Zird to inflict damage to the sorcerers. His Lore +4 is a Legendary (+8), and the sorcerers' Lore -4 is a Poor (-1). Zird wallops them with a 9-point hit, enough to force them into taking two consequences.

BATTLE EXCHANGE 2

The infantry, along with teamwork bonuses from Zird's presence, take out the last of the sorcerers with a quick attack.

Amanda moves the Red Troops out and they engage the infantry. Even with Zird's help, they end up taking more stress than they can absorb and are taken out.

Lily creates an advantage of **Ladders** so that the commandos can breach the fortress walls, but fails, and decides to succeed with a cost. Amanda suggests that the commandos are going to find themselves pincerred between the Red Troops in the field and the Tower Guards along the walls, and are basically stuck there.

Lenny asks if Landon and Zird can hold the infantry off and kite them away from the commandos to take the pressure off. Amanda looks incredulous, until Ryan explains that he wants to use magic to create the illusion of reinforcements from within the swamp.

She decides to call that an advantage flashpoint.

FLASHPOINT 3: SWORDS AND ILLUSIONS

Amanda decides to resolve the actual flashpoint as a challenge, and assigns three orthogonal tasks: distracting the troops with the illusion, causing violent mayhem, and drawing them away from the walls. Zird takes up the first and last with Lore, and Landon takes up the middle task with Fight.

The actions resolve as follows: Zird succeeds; Landon fails and chooses to succeed with cost, Zird ties. They narrate the outcome that the illusion happens and is effective, Landon ends up getting cornered and split off from Zird, and Zird doesn't manage to draw them away but does keep them occupied where they stand.

Amanda also decides that's good enough to give the advantage bonus to Zird, so the **Phantom Army Unit** with two free invokes appears for the PCs to use, attached to the Red Troops.

BATTLE EXCHANGE 3

The commandos engage the Tower Guard and mutually exchange hits.

Zird and Landon would normally be overrun by the infantry, but Ryan points out that phantom army unit would allow them to get out of there. Amanda says she'll let Ryan declare that if he spends one of his free invokes on it, and he does. Zird and Landon retreat back toward the keep to reinforce the commandos.

BATTLE EXCHANGE 4

The commandos, with teamwork bonuses from all the PCs, do heavy damage to the Tower Guards.

Zird invokes his last free aspect to keep the Red Troops occupied.

BATTLE EXCHANGE 5

Amanda decides that now, the Red Troops can use an action to overcome Zird's illusion. Zird doesn't have a relevant unit supporting him, so there's not really anything he can do about that, and the phantoms go away.

The commandos and the Tower Guards clash again, and as the result of terrible rolls, the commandos are forced to drop out of the fight.

This leaves the two remaining PCs stuck between the Tower Guards and the Red Troops. Lenny and Ryan suggest maybe they can fight an elite leader in a flashpoint, but Amanda notes that they probably wouldn't fall for that again after they saw Zird take down Kraag.

Reluctantly, the two are forced to concede and join Cynere in the keep dungeon.