

The Core of Fate Core

Dice

In Fate, you can roll 4dF, or d6–d6. A dF is a six-sided die with two sides marked -1, two sides blank (zero), and two sides +1.

This should be a decision made for the entire game, as each has its own peculiarities. Both produce a zero-centered distribution running from either -5 or -4 to +4 or +5. 4dF will generally feel more reliable, with the center weighted more heavily, while d6–d6 will produce wider and more frequent variation.

When you roll the dice, the number you get is added to the rating of the skill you're using to get the final result. Skills are rated according to the ladder.

The Ladder

Skills (and difficulties) are rated according to the adjective ladder. Each adjective also has a numeric value associated with it. You can treat the adjectives as optional or mandatory; they are there as tools for giving you a plain-English way of talking about the numbers. The default ladder for Fate is as follows (but can always be tweaked for your specific implementation's needs):

Value Adjective

+8	Legendary
+7	Epic
+6	Fantastic
+5	Superb
+4	Great
+3	Good
+2	Fair
+1	Average
+0	Mediocre
-1	Poor
-2	Terrible
-3	Awful
-4	Abysmal

Difficulty

Difficulties are rated on the ladder as well. When you roll, your skill rating + dice roll is compared to difficulty rating, and the difference between those two numbers is measured in **shifts**.

Generally speaking, if you get zero or more shifts (meeting or beating the difficulty target), your action is considered a success.

So what's a shift? Think of it as a unit of momentum, something which is used to *shift* the action in a direction you want. Some elements of the system may allow you to spend shifts as a kind of currency, spreading around the result, while others may simply be interested just in the total number.

Skills

Characters have skills, which are rated on the ladder. So what's a skill?

Skills represent what your character can do, the kinds of actions he or she can undertake. Skills also differentiate characters from one another, highlighting where they'll shine and where they're likely to play second fiddle. Actions will be discussed in greater detail later on in this document.

Choosing skills:

There are any number of ways you might have characters select skills in your game. In our published games, we favor a "pyramid" or "tower" style, where slots for skills are bought at each rating level from Average on up, with requirements as to how those slots are stacked atop each other. Other implementations may favor a simple point buy approach or something else entirely.

When setting things up for skill choice, think about two things:

- Niche protection: Offer enough skills with enough variety that each player can shine in a distinct and different way.
- Breadth of competence: How many skills can each character manageably take, and how many must they *not* take as a result?

The ideal (which may be different depending on the demands of your implementation) is a sweet-spot between the two, allowing players to create broadly competent characters that nonetheless do not step on each other's toes.

Designing skills:

A specific game should have a customized skill list that fits the priorities of the game's story and setting. A game where social interaction isn't particularly important or nuanced might simply present all social skills as a single Interaction skill. When social interaction is important (and

system support of that is desired), multiple skills may be warranted (such as Empathy, Rapport, Reputation, Deceit, Intimidation).

Skills are composed of one or more **trappings**. Broadly, a trapping is a kind of action (or family of actions) that a character can undertake using the skill. The concept of trappings is optional, really, but can be a good way to double-check that you're covering all your bases.

Some skills may have overlap, sharing a particular trapping between them. Nothing's wrong if this happens, but again, it's a good thing to keep an eye on.

If you're going to be using stunts, it's helpful to know what trappings your skills have.

Each skill might offer one or more of the following options for action, which will be discussed in more detail later in this document:

- The ability to take on a particular family of difficult tasks
- A method of gaining knowledge through perception or research
- A mode of attack
- A mode of defense
- The ability to endure a kind of stress
- The ability to speed movement and to move past obstacles
- The ability to change a target or environment in some way, often by introducing or discovering an aspect (note: an "environment" is not always about *physical* surroundings)
- A method of presenting a difficulty that others must overcome

In some implementations, *every* skill might offer *every* option, but in most cases each skill uses a subset available via the skill's trappings.

Aspects

Characters have aspects, which are not rated on the ladder. They can cover a wide range of elements about the character, painting a picture of who the character is, what he believes in and what's important to him, but also what he's connected to and what complicates his life. They can be relationships, beliefs, catchphrases, descriptors, items, and other things besides.

Importantly, the best aspects are double-edged, providing ways they can be used for advantage, ways they can complicate the character's situations and decisions, and ways other characters can leverage that part of the character.

Aspects are powered by fate points. A character will usually start with one or more fate points at the start of a session. How many will depend on the particulars of your implementation, but the sweet spot is to supply players with enough fate points that they feel like they can spend them when they most need to, but few enough that they have to make the occasional tough choice.

Aspects don't live exclusively on characters. Sometimes they live on things which contain characters (like scenes or locations or adventures), or which characters possess (like weapons or

vehicles or organizations). Where you might find aspects outside of characters themselves will vary depending on the specifics of your implementation.

Invoking aspects:

A player can take advantage of an aspect by spending a fate point. When this happens, the player **invokes** the aspect.

To invoke an aspect, identify which aspect you're intending to use, explain why it is relevant in this situation, and spend a fate point. Invoking lets you either:

- Pick up the dice you just rolled and roll them again, replacing the previous result with the new roll; or
- Add two to the result; or
- Invoke for effect. Invoking for effect allows you to use the aspect to declare something is true (assert story reality) or — if the aspect you're doing this to isn't yours — trigger a compel for the character possessing the aspect.

Some implementations may limit or change these options. Some may place limits on which categories and quantities of aspect can be invoked simultaneously (as with *Diaspora*'s concept of scope).

Sometimes a player may have an opportunity to invoke an aspect that isn't a part of his character: perhaps it's on the location, or on another character. This is perfectly fine so long as an acceptable explanation is made of how the player's character takes advantage of the aspect.

Some skills may provide the ability to introduce or reveal new aspects on the scene when a successful roll is made. Usually, the character that made the skill roll may invoke that aspect for the first time for free. This is called a **tag** of that aspect. In some or such cases, the tag may instead be available "publicly" to the first person to incorporate and invoke the aspect in question.

Compelling aspects:

A character's story can be significantly complicated by the presence of an aspect. When this happens, the player or the GM **compels** the aspect. When a character is compelled by an aspect, he gains a fate point.

Compels are often subject to some kind of approval process. If a player is undertaking an action that's complicated by his character's aspect, and calls out a compel, often it's up to the GM to agree whether it's allowed. If the GM compels a character's aspect, his player may have the option to refuse it (perhaps paying a fate point instead of gaining one). Sometimes a compel may come up after the fact, such as when the GM uses a character's aspect to introduce a complication to the plot, or when a scene concludes and it's clear the character was acting under the dictates of one of his aspects throughout.

A compel is a decision to set aside the dice and focus on the dictates of drama instead. It's a conversation about the aspect and how it creates a new complication, or otherwise shuts down or changes some of the options that were previously available. If the conversation suggests that a character's Drunk aspect means he makes a fool of himself at the governor's ball, there's no need to roll the dice to see what kind of impression he makes. The logic of this conversation replaces the rolling of dice as the way to determine the outcome.

Sometimes an aspect may exist outside of a character, but still be used to compel that character, such as with an aspect found on a location. If the location is "On Fire!", it's reasonable to suppose the characters located there will face compels related to their present predicament.

Choosing aspects:

Fate prefers that characters be created as part of a social gathering, rather than as a solo or homework exercise. The main weight of this intent bears on the choosing of aspects.

A character may start with one or two aspects selected simply to say what kind of a person the character is and what sort of complications typically befall him.

The rest of the aspects are determined by stepping through a particular sequence of **phases** as determined for your implementation.

In each phase, a piece of the character's back-story is determined, and one or more aspects are derived from that back-story.

One or more of these phases should involve one or more *other* characters from amongst the player characters. These cross-over phases are key to building a cohesive group that feels natural as a group. They establish lasting, core relationships among allies (and in some cases, enemies or rivals), and provide the social bedrock that the story of the player characters, and thus the game, will be built upon.

Think carefully about how many aspects a player (and, multiplicatively, a GM) will be able to parse, keep track of, and use over the course of a session. Make sure your background and phases don't result in too large a suite of aspects. Sometimes less is more, and if you're allowing a character to acquire a few temporary aspects during play (as with consequences, below) you'll want to be sure to leave room for those in your tally. For our money, the sweet spot in terms of permanent character aspects is between five to ten.

Stunts

Stunts are optional, but show up in enough implementations to warrant a place in the core. Put simply, they are "locked in" ways that a character can get an extra benefit when doing a specific kind of thing. In this they relate just a little bit to aspect invocations. An aspect invocation costs a fate point and gives you a highly flexible benefit equal to about two shifts. A stunt does not (usually) cost a fate point to use, and offers a specific (thus less flexible) benefit equal to about two shifts.

Stunts are tied in to skills. More specifically, they're usually tied into skill trappings, and improving how those trappings are used.

Designing stunts:

Depending on your druthers, an implementation may feature a list of pre-designed stunts for the players to pick from, or may allow the players to design their own. Either way, stunts should be designed along the following lines. (Note: The idea of stunt construction was not fully formed when *Spirit of the Century* was published, so you may find that some of the stunts in that product do not match up with these guidelines.)

A stunt provides one of the two following options:

- Adds a new trapping to a skill (usually enabling an action the skill couldn't normally perform)
- Extends an application of an existing trapping of a skill by providing about two shifts of benefit

These options should be restricted to a particular broad set of circumstances, and when extending with two shifts, should dictate how those shifts are applied.

Possible extensions include:

- Give a +2 to a specific application of a non-attack trapping
- Give a +1 to an attack, improving its accuracy (if your implementation values hit-or-miss accuracy more heavily than magnitude-of-success)
- Give a +2 to an attack's result, applied only if the attack was successful (same parenthetical comment as previous)
- Give one or two expendable 2-shift effects or a persistent 1-shift effect.
- Reduce the amount of time necessary to complete a particular task by two steps on a time chart
- Extend the duration of an effect by two steps on a time chart
- Reduce a particular kind of difficulty factor faced by the skill trapping by up to two
- Combine any two of the two-shift effects from above at half value
- Get a more powerful effect, but only when you spend a fate point

Choosing stunts:

When used, stunts are a big factor in character power. They provide an ongoing benefit roughly equal to the character gaining an additional fate point at the beginning of each session beyond the fate points he'll be starting with. This is something to keep in mind when determining how many stunts a character gets to start. One approach would involve simply setting a fixed number of stunts that each character gets (as in *Spirit of the Century*). Another approach would involve reducing the number of fate points a character gets at the start of a session by the number of stunts the character has (as in *The Dresden Files RPG*). Other approaches may exist as well.

Since each stunt represents a little extra bit of rules a player has to remember, keep that in mind as well when setting limits, and set the limits such that the quantity is likely to be manageable. Five or six stunts on average may be a good practical target.

Powers as Super-stunts:

You may find yourself wanting to create potent abilities for characters. Stunts provide an avenue for this; you might go with the idea of “super-stunts” that simply provide multiple stunts’ worth of benefit all in a single package that consumes multiple stunt slots. This is in essence how the supernatural abilities in *The Dresden Files RPG* were constructed.

Actions

Above, I talked about the sorts of actions a character can take when using his skills. Here, I’ll drill into each kind of action a little more.

The ability to take on a particular family of difficult tasks:

This is the classic catch-all for a skill. A Woodcraft skill would provide the ability to assail a variety of carpentry tasks, while an Athletics ability would include the ability to climb, for example.

As covered above, a difficulty is determined, a roll is made, and the result is compared to the difficulty. Success occurs if the result matches or beats the difficulty. Additional shifts might be “spent” in various ways to improve the quality of that success. Maybe the task is completed more quickly (a “time table” suited to your implementation helps here), or the craftsmanship is of unusually exquisite value.

A method of gaining knowledge through perception or research:

This is really a different variety of the first type of action, but worth calling out on its own. A Guns skill might include the ability to assess the armament of an opponent, or know general trivia about firearms.

Similar to the above, difficulties are determined, and the shifts generated by a success indicates the depth and quality of information attained. Sometimes these shifts might be spent individually for specific questions or facts, and as with the above, might be spent to speed up the rate at which the information is uncovered.

A mode of attack:

An attack is an action that inflicts **stress** on a target. Stress comes in one or more flavors tied to the kinds of conflict your implementation supports (such as physical, mental, social, resources, hunger, or doom), and as such the “mode” of the attack in question indicates the kind of stress you’re looking to inflict. Rarely, a skill might offer the ability to inflict more than one kind of stress with an attack, chosen at the time the attack is made.

An attack is usually made by comparing two skill rolls, the attacker's and the defender's, and using the shifts generated by the attacker (if successful) to determine the amount of stress inflicted. Here, zero shifts means that the attack "connects" but does not inflict stress — a distinction that is relevant if a stunt or other system effect is triggered only when an attack is successful.

That said, frankly, stress is an optional feature. You may wish to make an implementation where hitting your target creates some other effect: outright death or removal from the fight, a difficulty factor that the victim must overcome, or something else. In that case, your "attack" is actually one of the other kinds of actions covered in this section.

A mode of defense:

Defensive uses are reactive, seeking to prevent an attack against you from succeeding. They are often specified to be used only against certain kinds of attack. See the attack action, above, for system particulars.

One downside of a reactive ability like this is that a particularly good roll — one in which the defender generates a number of shifts rather than the attacker — can feel "wasted" unless a use is made possible. A few options exist to address that.

One such option is the notion of **spin**. Here, when a defender beats the attack by 3 shifts or more, he gets spin, allowing him to add +1 to either side of the very next roll (including those made by allies), essentially as a way of passing the momentum of a very successful defense on to another part of the scene.

Another possibility, more potent, would be to allow the defender to place a temporary aspect on his attacker when beating the attack by 3 shifts. In overextending himself, the attacker has left an opening...

The ability to endure a kind of stress:

As noted above (see the attack section), characters incur stress when they're victims of attack actions. Some skills improve the ability to endure this, by increasing the character's capacity for stress.

All characters have a baseline amount of stress they can take (in DFRPG, 2; in SOTC, 5). This stress is represented as a track of numbered boxes. The higher a character's stress-capacity skill, the longer the affected track (often gaining an additional box for every two steps above Mediocre, rounded up).

The length of a stress track should be considered carefully when designing your implementation. Make it too long and the characters feel invulnerable (frankly a real risk in SOTC).

When taking stress, the box with a number matching the amount of stress taken is checked off. If that box is already checked off, the next higher unchecked box is checked. If no available higher

boxes exist, the character is taken out — removed from the conflict, or at least from the dimension of the conflict represented by the stress track.

When an attack takes out a character, the attacker gets to determine what happens to them within the scope of the type of stress inflicted (you can't punch someone's reputation into a bad state, but you can break their bones or kill them or just knock them out).

A player may remove his character from the conflict ahead of time, however, by offering a concession. A concession is identical to a taken out result, but gets defined on the victim's terms rather than the attacker's. The attacker may (and often should) get the option to refuse an unreasonable or unsatisfying concession, but this is not a carte-blanche veto power so much as an option to negotiate.

Optionally (but recommended), stress may be mitigated by **consequences**. A consequence is a temporary, negative aspect the character takes on, usually filling one of a limited number of slots (one of each level). The attacker may tag a consequence as with any revealed-through-a-skill-roll aspect. The amount of stress reduced taking the consequence depends on how long it will take the character to recover from the consequence. Our defaults:

- Mild consequence, reducing stress taken by 2, fades after a scene of rest
- Moderate consequence, reducing stress taken by 4, fades after a session of play
- Severe consequence, reducing stress taken by 6, fades after the conclusion of the current story (implying some downtime before the next story commences)
- Optional: Extreme consequence, reducing stress taken by 8, but permanent, and possibly replacing one of the character's other existing permanent aspects

When consequences are in play, you may want to consider a rules option that pays out a number of fate points (1, 2, or 3) equal to the worst level of consequence the character is currently carrying when that character concedes a conflict.

The ability to speed movement and to move past obstacles:

We recommend the use of maps, however abstract, to help root play in a sense of we're-all-on-the-same-page physicality. In Fate, we divide these maps up into **zones**. A zone is about as big as the space you'd expect a character to be able to move through in one turn while undertaking another action.

But sometimes moving *is* the action, and the character should be able to eat up more ground when doing so. Here, the character rolls the appropriate skill against (almost always) a target of 0. If he generates one or fewer shifts, he may only move one zone. If he generates more, he may move a number of zones equal to the number of shifts.

Some maps will offer obstacles which will require multiple shifts in order to move into or out of a given zone. These obstacles are called **borders** and are given a numeric value equal to the number of shifts required to overcome it. A zone surrounded by a border of 2 will require three shifts to move into (2 to overcome the border, 1 to move into the zone). When a border is

involved, failing to generate enough shifts means you can't move into that zone on this turn. Often it's workable to accumulate shifts across multiple turns when a particularly large or troublesome border is encountered.

The ability to change a target or environment in some way:

Whether the result of research or specialized knowledge, or as a particular combat maneuver, characters in fate may be able to use their skills to temporarily alter or add aspects on another character, or even the environment itself (whether that environment is the physical location, the loom of fate, or the reactions of a crowd).

In a conflict, this kind of action is referred to as a maneuver. With a knowledge or perception skill, it might be an assessment (where an existing but unknown aspect is discovered) or a declaration (where new facts are asserted as true on the basis of the quality of the character's knowledge).

In any event, on a success, the player describes the new aspect (or finds out what the new aspect is), and the aspect is available for a tag as previously discussed, as well as invokes and compels. Usually only one aspect may be created at a time, per action. In some cases the value of the roll made will indicate how difficult it is to "uproot" the aspect and get rid of it. In other cases, getting rid of it will be impossible, or require a simple success against a lower target. In addition, the temporary aspect may depending on its nature simply disappear after one use is made of it.

A method of presenting a difficulty that others must overcome:

Some skills may provide a pasive or active ability to create a difficulty rating that others must overcome. A character's Preparedness skill might represent how difficult it is to surprise him — or enter his private estate undetected. A character might have a combat skill that allows him to interpose himself and offer a second line of defense for an ally under attack.

When used in this way, the skill is rolled to create a **block**. A block is a short-term, persistent effect which sets the minimum difficulty for making a particular action. From our examples above, the character might roll Preparedness to create a block against enemies trying to infiltrate his estate, or Swordplay to bodyguard his friendly neighborhood wizard. An aggressor must roll well enough to beat either the block or the standard difficulty (or defense roll), whichever is higher, in order to succeed and generate shifts.

Supporting Character Change and Growth (Advancement)

Over the course of stories, characters certainly change, but that does not always translate to measurable, statable growth. With this in mind, I'm loath to call the following "advancement" on the grounds that that's too reductionist a way of looking at things. Instead, let's call this character development. In Fate, character development occurs along several possible axes:

- **Change Aspects:** The character experiences a change of nature, perspective, identity, relationship, or belief

- **Shuffle Skills:** The character shifts the focus of his expertise, falling out of practice with one skill while improving another
- **Gain or Increase Skills:** The character's competence broadens or deepens
- **Gain Stunts (or FP):** The character grows in power

Depending on your implementation particulars, characters may experience development along one or more of the above lines, each at their own pace. One possible plan for this is presented in the *Dresden Files RPG*, using a system of minor, significant, and major milestones in the story's progress to determine when a character may do one or more of the above (focusing on the first two as frequent occurrences, while the second two come along more rarely).

Extending the Game: The Fate Fractal

When adding something new to Fate for your specific implementation, it's important to keep the basics of the system intact. You're adding new rules, yes, but those rules should be constructed out of the existing building blocks. This helps make sure the new stuff you add in remains *familiar* to players already on board with the basics of the game.

So what's the essential atom of a Fate game? The character. What particles make up the atom? Aspects, skills, stunts, and stress tracks. When you use these particles as your building blocks for new system components and concepts, you're ensuring that the end result has that sought-after familiarity. And thus by building your new system components out of these existing parts, you add *seeming* complexity while *actually* retaining the core simplicity of the system.

This effect is what us gearheads refer to as the **Fate Fractal**. When fully and thoughtfully deployed, the fractal makes sure that no matter how close in or far out you zoom your focus, you'll find something familiar based in the character components and actions you already know.

A few thought experiments, briefly detailed, to get this concept across:

I'm unsatisfied by representing a burning building simply as an aspect on a location. I want some kind of ongoing damage idea. Using the fractal, I know that ongoing damage should be designed like a character. I've already got the aspect; one thing that's missing is, say, a skill — one which can be used to attack characters exposed to the flame. Voilla — I have something which produces the ongoing damage of a burning building. Maybe it has another skill which represents how hard it is to put out — and a stress track for tracking how effectively it's being extinguished.

I want to represent vast, secret organizations fighting secret wars, as a second layer of political action running alongside the personal action of the game. Using the fractal, I know these secret organizations can be statted up just like characters, either in a simplified or fully detailed format — Aspects? Sure. Skills? Definitely. Stunts? Could be. Stress tracks? Only if you want to be awesome! Phases and back stories and interrelationships? Now you're cooking.

I'm running a Fate fantasy game and I'm looking to make magic items potent, rare, and storied. I want them to have a little more traction than just showing up as someone's aspect (or, maybe, stunt). The fractal tells me that I should make magic items like characters, with their own aspects

(resulting from phases — the item has a story), stunts, and skills, potentially conferring onto the bearer or potentially acting on their own. Maybe the items are a way of cheating fate, of allowing the bearer to act above his station or in a way that plays merry havoc with the Great Loom. So how about a stress track, one that represents the magic item's progression towards ultimate doom?

Those are just three examples, but hopefully they point the way as to how you can use the stuff you already know to build and play characters in order to build and use other components for the system. Almost always you can get exactly what you need by treating the thing you want to add as a character — albeit, sometimes at a different scale (physically, temporally, or otherwise) of operation.