

Fateful Concepts

Character Aspects



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About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

When *Spirit of the Century* came out at the end of 2006, I became an instant fan of it and Fate overall. In the last eight years, I've watched many people experiment with the system, trying all sorts of hacks, some which have since become in a sense canonical Fate rules. Other experiments were successful in a different way—not because they worked, but because they spurred conversation that helped our community better understand Fate.

This collection of articles is part of that spirit of understanding and experimentation. It's not a rules update so much as a compilation of findings and explanations that have evolved over the years—both as a long-time fan and also working as Leonard Balsera's co-conspirator on *The Dresden Files Roleplaying Game* and *Fate Core System*

In this collection, I'll focus on some character creation and character aspect topics. These are a hybrid of designer's notes and thought experiments, which you are welcome to integrate and remix into your Fate publications. Some of these thoughts come from posts on my blog (RyanMacklin.com), which have been expanded based on comments and questions I've received since they were posted.

Why Five Aspects? Unpacking the Aspect Economy

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In Fate Core, we pared the aspects down to five. This article discusses the evolution of the aspect economy through different versions of Fate and the design philosophy behind the number of character aspects in Fate Core, all while exposing the underlying framework of Fate's aspect economy.

Decoupling Phases and Aspects

p. 8

Most Fate games link the phases and aspects together. This article shows the power in decoupling that connection and how decoupling can ease creative fatigue. It's also a foundation for the following essays.

Aspect Slots

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A concept that is briefly mentioned in Fate Core, aspect slots are a method of focusing character creation. This essay shows how to build an aspect slot list and touches upon swapping out slots as part of advancement.

Casting: High Concept and Trouble Menus

p. 16

The final essay in this collection uses the idea of explicitly defined menus to make character creation quicker, imply a variety of setting elements without the need for detailed exposition, and foster creativity through choosing combinations rather than trying to make something up without strong constraints.

WHY FIVE ASPECTS? UNPACKING THE ASPECT ECONOMY

In Fate Core, we made the decision for characters to have five aspects attached to them: one relating to their high concept, one to trouble, and three others tied to the phase trio. This is a shift away from earlier designs that had more character actions, and a change that people frequently ask about. In answering this question, I'll share with you some basic Fate philosophies and underlying frameworks, which are key to really understanding how to change the character aspect dynamic.

A Brief History of Aspects

To understand what we were thinking while designing Fate Core, it helps to know a brief history of Fate. Over the years, we've watched how people reacted to incarnations of Fate: not just Evil Hat's own *Spirit of the Century* and *The Dresden Files Roleplaying Game*, but also third-party publishers like VSCA's *Diaspora* and Galileo Games's *Bulldogs!* Aspects have always been a talking point, since it's at the heart of what makes Fate, well, Fate.

But *Spirit of the Century*'s ten aspects were deemed far too many by a significant segment of the community, and there were three overall recurring issues that came from ten aspects.

First, it overwhelmed players in character creation, to the point of either paralysis or phoning in poor aspects due to creative fatigue. Our response to this was to say that you can leave some aspects blank, and you can rework them later to make them better, but that goes counter to a certain psychology that loves to play Fate—more on that later, though.

Second, it overwhelmed GMs who felt like they had to pay attention to all ten aspects per player, so maybe thirty or forty or sixty aspects constantly in mind during the game.

Third, some people felt like having that many aspects in a sense diluted the pool, because combined with the number of fate points characters had, they could surely find any aspect on their sheet to invoke and better their roll.

The first two are usability problems, which Fate attempts to solve through advice text, but the last point addresses the heart of a broken aspect economy.

Game Design is About Creating Choices

Spirit of the Century has, by and large, the same mechanics for creating an advantage and using free invocations—called “maneuvers” and “tags”—but people did them more often for color than for need. (The large number of fate point refresh and stress boxes also contributed

to this behavior.) That's the kernel around the idea that reducing the number of character aspects is better for play, because it pushes people to engage in situational aspects.

A game design principle I learned years ago from John Wick is that the heart of game design lies in there being non-optimal choices. When you have rules and systems where you have to choose between two or more things that you want in the moment, hoping that you'll get everything you want eventually, you have the core of a game. This philosophy fits very much in character creation: just as you can't have every skill and every stunt, you can't have every single aspect that comes into mind. If you have everything you want, you won't push yourself hard in the game.

In Fate terms, you won't feel the draw to create situational aspects in order to gain an story advantages, but only for free invocations. You won't create moments of change in characters by retiring an aspect and replacing it with another concept. To those who want more than five aspects: limiting to five keeps you *hungry* for more, and that hunger drives passionate and strong play.

The Struggle to Create Aspects

The advice to players to leave some aspects blank or revise them in play works if you let it, as does the advice to GMs to not constantly chew on every aspect during the game. But in order for players to be comfortable with that, the GM and group have to create an environment that doesn't make this a shameful or humiliating thing to do. If you have one "aspect rock star" at the table who can quickly make ten interesting and colorful aspects—sometimes, in fact, at the expense of those aspects being *clear*—then others feel the desire to keep up. (If that player happens to be the sort of person who playfully taunts about such things, that's all the worse.) Suddenly, our advice sounds like a weak out rather than genuine assistance.

Likewise, telling GMs to pick and choose aspects, to focus on a few rather than the entire pie, can sound like to some as "hey, it's cool to slack off as a GM." Whenever reasonable advice fights against basic emotions like pride or shame, reasonable advice is on the losing end of that fight. It's easy to feel like you can "pull yourself up" or "rise to a challenge" or "do your job," whatever any of those things mean.

So we have this genuine game economy problem, and solving it would help a usability issue. Sounds like a win-win? Well, it was... for the most part.

Going From Ten to Seven Wasn't Enough

When we moved from ten aspects in *Spirit of the Century* to seven in *The Dresden Files Roleplaying Game*, we felt like we fixed the problem. Along

with that, Dresden does a better job of giving GMs tools for using aspects in a game, which is effectively a two-stage process:

1. Pick just a few aspects.
2. Use them to make a plot.

By adding that second component, we helped establish a rationale to keep your eye on a few aspects beyond “hey, don’t try to do that because your job will be harder.” And I’d like to think we were better about that on the player-end, creating more prompts to help with creative fatigue during character creation.

I say “I’d like to think that” because sometimes that was true, and sometimes that was very untrue. While we were working Fate Core, some local friends asked me to run Dresden for them. So we made characters, and I watched them struggle during and after the third phase—not because the prompts were hard, but because creative fatigue was setting in. Granted, it was setting in at different rates for the group, but it overall evened out as the players who weren’t quite spent helped the others come up with aspects. By the seventh aspect, I could tell there were at least one phoned in aspect that would most likely not be used by either me as the GM or by the players.

Between that and frequently running convention games that were very successful with fewer aspects, that caused us to reevaluate the number of aspects in Fate Core.

Even Fewer Aspects for Convention Games

While five is a good number for convention games, lately I’ve reduced it for expediency. I typically start a four-hour convention game with three aspects: the high concept, the trouble, and a third wildcard. Along with the apex skills and a rough idea of a stunt, that’s enough character definition for a couple hours of play. Partway through, I’ll open up a fourth aspect slot to fill it, just like one would fill in a skill slot in play. If someone has a strong idea for a fifth aspect, I ask them to write that down as well, but I don’t offer that explicitly because I don’t want to pressure people to feel like they have to make up two more.

The Core Rubric

In Fate Core (and somewhat in Fate Accelerated), we use the five-aspect setup mentioned at the beginning. Experience had taught us that for convention games, five was a good number—it gave plenty of options for character definition and action, and GMs tools to use, especially as we kept the high concept and trouble elements from Dresden. Five aspects, along with a tighter fate point economy, prompts creating advantages. This change turned Fate into something streamlined and sharper. It also aided in speeding up the decision time after a roll is made, as there's less to look over when trying to find something to invoke.

Solutions from Other Games

Of course, the world of Fate design is all about parallel evolution, and people made games that brilliantly tackled the economy issue in different ways. If you want to check some other formative works out, I recommend:

- ◆ Galileo Games's *Bulldogs!* for its explicitly typed aspects in character creation. Also, its skill breakdown directly led to the four actions concept in Fate Core and Accelerated.
- ◆ VSCA's *Diaspora* for its notion of aspect scope, which restricts invocation based on where a given aspect lives in the world.
- ◆ John Wick's *Houses of the Blooded*, which while not a Fate game, took the idea of aspects for another system and included a line for each one on how to explicitly invoke or compel them in the story. In that game, that was the only way you invoked or compelled them, but the idea of writing down some notes beyond florid prose for aspects is very useful.



DECOUPLING PHASES AND ASPECTS

One design element that has persisted through most Fate variants over the years is to have character aspects tied directly to various questions in character creation. In *Spirit of the Century*, two aspects are tied to growing up, two to a pivotal moment in your backstory, two to your first adventure, and four aspects to two different crossing paths segments. In *The Dresden Files Roleplaying Game*, one aspect is tied to a high concept, one to a trouble, and then one to each of the five phases—emulating *Spirit of the Century's* dynamic.

In making Fate Core, we stuck to this idea, but trimmed two phases out in order to reduce the aspects to five. Some people miss answering the phases themselves (including me, at times), which leads to the idea of explicitly **decoupling phases and aspects**: answering all of the various character creation phases using regular language and spending time to make aspects only after you've finished writing about *all* of the phases.

We have halfway recommended this idea in various Fate games, when reminding GMs to encourage players stumped on an aspect to leave it blank and fill it in later. But that's a far cry from making that an intentional part of the process, as by separating them, you get to see more of the shape of your character before writing down high concepts and troubles, and it's easier to revise older answers because you didn't spend effort in making interesting or witty aspects.

Simple Decoupling

The simple way to decouple phases and aspects in Fate Core is to keep the same questions and prompts, and then make the aspects as Core expects afterward: high concept, trouble, adventure, and two crossing paths. There's no change to the content, only the order.

Even if you have a good idea for an aspect, don't write one down yet—leaving an aspect blank forces you to revisit your ideas, whereas writing something down and saying “I'll change it if I have a better idea” doesn't force that. The act of writing itself calcifies concepts, for good but also for ill.

It's best to wait for the whole group to be done with the phases, not just when you're done with your own character. That way, you have all the material from everyone's crossing paths phases, and you're able to help each other make aspects without interrupting someone still working on a phase.

The Real Magic of Decoupling

However, that's just the start of how to use this technique. Here's a generalized and more flexible take on character creation with this decoupling method in action.

1. Write down the high concept, as a general statement. Don't try to refine this into a catchy aspect yet. Something like "A guy who is chasing after monsters because his father was a demon" or "a private detective who is secretly from the future."
2. Write down the sort of trouble the character must contend with, again just as a general statement. "I drink too much, which leads to fights and blackouts" or "my very shadow is infused with a demonic spirit that wants me to become evil" are two statements that work for just talking about a trouble.
3. Detail some backstory. But one question isn't really great for making dynamic characters, so let's go with at least two.
 - a. Detail some formative experience that led to who your character is today.
 - b. Detail a vivid memory of pride or fear, and how that shaped your character.
 - c. Detail a recent adventure or other exciting thing—ideally (but not necessarily) something other characters could be involved with.
4. Then do two rounds of crossing paths, writing down just the narrative details.

So, with all of that, make up five aspects. Cover these bases with the aspects you make:

- ◆ Your character's role in the story-at-large
- ◆ Problems that will haunt your character
- ◆ Interesting strengths and assets
- ◆ Ties to characters or to the world, as direct or implied relationships

Post-Publication Hindsight

One interesting effect of making aspects after each phase is that players at times are hesitant to revise an earlier phrase into something they'd like more because they can't think of a new aspect. For those people, writing aspects earlier cements the character in difficult ways. That's part of what led to rethinking the whole phase scheme entirely.

Most of the aspects you'll make should cover two of these categories, such as your character's role possibly also showing a strength, your trouble also showing a relationship to the world, and so on. Note that the example statements in the high concept and trouble could turn into any number of aspects, but by doing the work of defining the narrative elements first, the form of those aspects is made relevant to the entire character, not just the first idea the player had.

Decoupling Crossing Paths

One great way to use crossing paths is not necessarily couple it to the adventure phase. While tying crossing paths to an explicit event helps cement some time line on when characters knew each other, that can be a struggle to shoehorn your character into a situation she might not be appropriate to be in. (Once for a supernatural game, I had a player say, "I'm not sure how my character would be involved. He was dead during that.")

Instead, look at crossing paths as hooking into *any part of another character's story*, as appropriate. Two characters that grew up together could feature in each other's formative experiences, for example. Or you could write a new story moment together, if you're having a problem drawing from what's been established; for example, two characters that have no reason to be in each other's backstory might have instead met last night in a barroom brawl, and happened to be on the same side in said fight.

Along with that, when coming up with aspects from crossing over, don't feel constrained to just your answers. Draw from what others described in your adventure or other moments, or what third parties described. Implied and explicit connections to other characters are what's particularly important about those aspects, rather than adherence to a specific formula.

That said, this technique isn't without pitfalls. The adventure helps tie people together in the same time line, and because two people cross paths in each adventure, that method ties three characters together at once. And the warnings about creative fatigue apply to this. But when it works, it makes for amazing character dynamics.

Bringing Back the Old

Decoupling phases from aspects means we can bring back elements from older Fate games that we removed in Fate Core. We can use the above setup from the point of view of The Dresden Files' phases, slightly tweaking along the way.

1. Come up with the high concept as a general statement and *not* as an aspect. Use the general advice from page 32 of Fate Core, unless there's something setting-specific to keep in mind.
2. Define the sort of trouble the character must contend with, again just as a general statement. Likewise, draw from the distinctions on page 34 of Fate Core, unless the setting has other plans.
3. Describe with a bit of narrative some information about your character's background. Use this to set up the character's story: What happened during their youth and more impressionable years? Where do they come from? What do they think about when they look toward the past? What happened back then that started them on the path they walk today?
4. Tell about a moment of crisis, when a rising conflict came to bear and the character was tested. This could be a literal moment, some longer event, or a stretch of time that the character endured. How did this shape and change them? What doors become open after this, and which were closed off?
5. Come up with a recent adventure or other exciting moment, as appropriate to the setting and campaign concept.
6. Do the two crossing paths phases.

This setup gives all the explicitly framed space for making a character who has a starting arc, once again all before making aspects. Having a sense of that arc means it's easier to make all of the aspects follow an arc without erasing (or the second-guessing that seems to be frequent when one picks up an eraser).



ASPECT SLOTS

A useful way to see making aspects during character creation is to see it as **filling in aspect slots**: holes where aspects fit in from various prompts. This is already what you're doing, and is also how consequence aspects work, but by explicitly looking at these in terms of slots we can bring other ideas to the surface—for character creation and advancement.

Core's Slots

With Core's default phase trio, it has four types of aspect slots:

- ◆ High Concept
- ◆ Trouble
- ◆ Detail
- ◆ Connection, with two slots of this type

In general, we advise high concept and trouble in nearly all builds of Fate Core, or *at least* asking those two as questions early on even if they don't directly become aspects. We also state in Fate Core that you can swap out the phase trio for another rubric.

Character details (or just "details") are internally focused. The adventure phase asks for some sort of detail as an aspect, whether it's a talent, object, detriment, relationship, etc. Details express the character in relation to the setting. Connection, on the other hand, expresses the character in relation to another character—though that expression could also be some talent or detriment that was important to the story between those two characters.

If you don't decouple phases and aspects (see previous essay), there isn't much more to play with in this regard, since each aspect is effectively typed to only one static prompt. But when you decouple them, you can come up with other setups. For example:

- ◆ High Concept
- ◆ Trouble
- ◆ Detail
- ◆ Connection
- ◆ Detail or Connection

From there, four concrete slots are made, with a fifth meant to cover wider latitude of inputs. Or go with Fate Accelerated's slots, which combine flexibility with the focus from a phase-oriented questionnaire:

- ◆ High Concept
- ◆ Trouble
- ◆ Wild
- ◆ Optional Wild ×2

Defining Other Slot Builds

You can also create the potential for interesting juxtaposition by making aspect slots that aren't based on the prompts from the phase trio. You can use this technique to influence how characters interface with the game by drawing out specific narrative elements, such as:

- ◆ High Concept
- ◆ Haunting Past
- ◆ Trouble Today
- ◆ Giving Help
- ◆ Receiving Help

This setup is about two forms of trouble aspects (Haunting Past and Trouble Today), and turning the connection into aspects—one relating to how you helped someone (Giving Help), the other on how someone helped you (Receiving Help). Receiving Help is primed to be a relationship aspect based on how you feel about that person, like *I Owe Simmons*, or something that happened in that moment, like *My Flawless Reputation... which I owe to Fitz*.

Here's a different idea, one intended for a space opera (such as a five-aspect take on Galileo Games's *Bulldogs!*):

- ◆ Species Aspect
- ◆ High Concept
- ◆ Trouble
- ◆ Detail
- ◆ Connection

Wild Aspect Slots

One way to use slots is to just declare that it's wild: put whatever aspect you want there, rather than adhere to a concept. That can be a useful release valve for putting an idea on a character that a player really wants to play with, but doesn't fit well in the other slots and would be painful to shoehorn in. However, be on guard when using multiple wild aspects, as it can cause paralysis after the first one or two have been filled in. Even when playing with adept Fate players, typing can help smooth the process a little.

This frees up the role of high concept to be about, as intended, the overall role of that character in the story, and not lumping the space opera trope of playing different species on top of it. That's something to do if you want species to be played with to an equal degree as high concept *and* want them both invoked in a roll or find separate ways to compel the character. Additionally, if you have one connection but multiple moments for that in the phase trio, you can choose whichever connection moment seems to make the best aspect.

One last example, for something action-horror related:

- ◆ High Concept
- ◆ Trouble
- ◆ Heroic Moment
- ◆ Experience with Great Horrors (a detail or a connection)
- ◆ Connection

This setup puts forward that a character's trouble aspect shouldn't be tied to experiences with horrors, especially if what you want is something that grounds the character in mundane reality (which is important for juxtaposing that with the unnatural). And the heroic moment aspect asks the players to remember that their characters are interesting heroes in the face of danger, and have a background in such.

Swapping Out in Advancement

As early on as minor milestones, Fate Core tells you to consider renaming an aspect that isn't your high concept (and to consider renaming your high concept with a major milestone). Much of the advice that we give out both in the book and on the Internet is to see those moments as opportunities of growth, to show how your character has changed, or how the world has changed in relation to your character. Things like *Anger at my Father's Death* could become *Trying to Cope with my Rage*, or *Hunted by the League of Manassins* could turn into *In Love with the Manassin King*.

But growing an aspect based on the story is just one way to use the opportunity a milestone gives you. The other is to put one aspect away—to use a sports metaphor, putting that aspect on the bench—and giving another one its day in the sun. If you have another idea that reflects a part of your character that isn't getting as much on-screen attention, swap out an aspect that already has had a lot of play but isn't currently a plot motivator.

For example, if you're becoming bored with *Anger at my Father's Death* being a source of compels and you feel like it's turning your

character into a caricature, swap it out for something else about your character that isn't necessarily related, like *Internal Affairs is Eyeing me Again* or *My Ex-Husband is Dating the Villain*. This is a good method for introducing the GM and group to a new source of side-plot conflict, or even something that could become tied into the primary storyline. You're not any less angry about your father's death, but now it's not getting the spotlight. Later, you can always swap the aspect back in.

Do You Adhere to the Slot's Original Type?

At this point, you might not necessarily adhere to aspect slot typing, outside of keeping the high concept about the character's role in the story and keeping the trouble about a continual problem.

Changing a slot that drew from an adventure or other moment just means you're updating something from before we saw the character in action to something that's in play. Changing a connection slot to something that doesn't involve a relationship or moment with that other character doesn't detract from the game, as time spent seeing the characters together on-screen is a more powerful bond (positive or negative) than a few words written in character creation.

That said, if the GM sees a particular aspect slot type that you feel is necessary to be beholden to (again, the high concept fits here) then keep to it. Just make sure that it doesn't cause problems for those who are trying to change out an aspect they're bored with, but can't come up with one because the slot's type is too constraining.

Making More Aspects than Slots

Building off of that last point, the thing about thinking in terms of slots is that you can make more aspects beyond the number needed to fill all the slots. You just can't *use* them all at once. So for those who feel like they cannot have a fully defined character with less than, say, seven aspects, make your seven aspects and pick five to actively be in slots. When you get to a milestone, that's your cue to consider swapping one for another. So if what you need to do to make a character you like is write more backstory and come up with backup aspects, please do.



CASTING: HIGH CONCEPT AND TROUBLE MENUS

One of the things that people run into when starting to make Fate characters is that sometimes coming up with high concepts and troubles happens immediately, and sometimes it's a grueling process that drains creative energy for the rest of character creation. Even having an immediate idea can lead to problems, such as when creative energy is spent on making something that isn't a good fit for the game and the group.

One way to address this is for the GM to present choices to the players that are either pre-made or partially made aspects. I call this **casting**, as it tells people what sort of character archetypes and ideas the game's made for. To use casting, you come up with a few options for high concepts and a few options for troubles—which is a technique that's easy to use, and it comes with a wealth of options.

High Concept Casting

Figuring out your menu of high concepts involves jotting down a few ideas and making some decisions as to how the menu gets used. First, come up with a few possible high concepts that are suitable for PC and that your players could get some traction with. (In the case of convention games, you don't know who those players are going to be, so err on the side of simple, iconic concepts.)

As you are jotting down a few ideas, you need to know the answer to this question: *Do I want players to all pick different high concepts (“exclusive”), or do I want to allow them to explore being different facets of the same concept (“double up”)?* If you require all different concepts, come up with a number that's between one and three higher than the number of players—so for four players, between five and seven concepts—that way the last person to pick a concept isn't stuck with one they don't want to play or don't think they can play well. On the other hand, if you don't mind people doubling up on concepts, you can get away with as few as three ideas; if you *want to force* people to double up and explore different facets of the same concept, definitely constrain the menu.

Once you have that, the other decision point to make is: *Do I want players to modify these high concepts (such as with adjectives or other color), or do I want them to use the aspects exactly as-is?* Again, either answer is right—using aspects as-is means the process is that much quicker, but it also means you might need to front-load those aspects with more flavor than just **Cop** or **Wizard** (unless you're intentionally keeping the aspect simple). Having the players tweak their high concept aspects makes making that list easier, but isn't right for every menu.

Here are two examples that show different ways to implement this: one themed around classic fantasy adventurers, with doubling up and modifying the aspects; one about 1920s American noir, with exclusivity and using the aspects as-is.

Fantasy Adventurers

- ◆ *Cleric*
- ◆ *Fighter*
- ◆ *Thief*
- ◆ *Wizard*

These are simple and cater to those familiar with the genre. *Cleric* could become *Cleric of [Specific God]*. *Thief* could also become *Rogue*, if you're into that sort of thing. *Wizard* could become *Elemental Arcanist* just as easily as it could become *Necromancer Apprentice*. And *Fighter* could turn into *Archery Badass* or *Awesome Two-Weapon Fighter*. While this list could include other class-based fantasy archetypes, by keeping it constrained you're likely to get people to double up and show how the same core concept results in different characters adventuring side-by-side.

To add a bit of spin to the idea, you might **privilege** one of these choices—saying that you only want one of a given type, like there's only one *Cleric* for this adventuring party because conduits of the gods are exceedingly rare in this world. That's a dial you can tweak for the sake of the setting and its implications.

1920s American Noir

- ◆ *Crooked Cop*
- ◆ *Idealistic Cop*
- ◆ *Frustrated Honeypot*
- ◆ *Grizzled P.I.*
- ◆ *Killer Making Amends*
- ◆ *Well-Known Fixer*
- ◆ *Hard-Boiled Journalist*

Here's a menu intended for players to choose different high concepts, themed around some common tropes in noir fiction that this particular GM wants to play with for a given game. These aspects have more definition to them than in the fantasy example, as they're intended to be picked and used right away.

Going with this setup, tell the players that they should rewrite those aspects to be custom after you've played for two sessions. That alleviates concerns of feeling like you aren't getting to fully define your character, but offloads that until two sessions of play have had a chance to influence such revision.

Two-Item High Concepts

For an even more dynamic way of using high concept casting, you can broaden the idea to choosing from two menus. It's a simple extension of what's been shown previously, though because you're making two lists and having players combine them into something, as a GM it's actually a little less work on your part to make a wealth of options. For this example, we'll do a paranormal intrigue/romance sort of game.

Creature Type

- ◆ *Gifted Mortal*
- ◆ *Vampire*
- ◆ *Werewolf*
- ◆ *Ghost*
- ◆ *Faerie-Born*

Role in the Supernatural Society

- ◆ *Newcomer*
- ◆ *Alpha*
- ◆ *Shunned*
- ◆ *Exile*
- ◆ *Go-Between*

With two lists of five choices each, now you've got 25 different options. As before, decide on whether to allow double-ups (such as two *Ghost Newcomers*) and whether the aspects listed are as-is. As mentioned in the fantasy example, you might privilege an option, like only one *Newcomer* or *Faerie-Born*, or even state that there's a combination you don't want for whatever reason, like *Shunned Gifted Mortal* (in that case, because it might be too easy overdo the outcast element for that concept).

This idea can work for the fantasy example, not just in terms of fantasy races but also for the classic trope of alignment. That said, don't go overboard here—if you overcomplicate menus, you're throwing out what works about casting: speed and simplification.

Trouble Casting

Making a menu of troubles isn't exactly as straightforward as making one for high concepts, but still quite possible if you look at troubles as subplots you can mix and match between different archetypes. The overall advice for making a menu of troubles is the same when making a high concept menu.

Let's look at two examples from earlier, first the noir and then the fantasy one.

1920s American Noir

- ◆ *Gambling Debts*
- ◆ *Rocky Marriage*
- ◆ *Survivor's Guilt*
- ◆ *In Love with Drink*
- ◆ *Shameless Rake*
- ◆ *Minority in an Intolerant World*
- ◆ *Hated for Being a Snitch*

All of these are subplots that could more-or-less slide into various American noir stories. My default would be to also have these troubles be exclusive—players all picking something different. If going with that, let the people who picked high concepts later get first crack at troubles. Alternatively, you could allow doubling up on both high concepts and troubles, but require that no one have the same two in combination.

I didn't list any above that would lend themselves being a major arc in and of itself, such as *Missing Sibling* or *Murdered Partner/Friend*, though I could just as easily put that on the list and have that be a trouble I require someone to take.

Fantasy Adventurers

For this one, I'll make a short list of troubles for each high concept, in part to push some of the setting onto the players' minds. Even the choices not taken inform the nature of the setting.

Required Aspects in Menus

A given scenario might need one of the high concepts or troubles to be taken, notably if you've prepared a convention game and don't have time to revise ideas because someone didn't pick a given aspect. In those cases, point out those requirements—that's also a valid way of using this tool.

Cleric

- ◆ *Gods Require My Atonement*
- ◆ *First Week out of the Temple*
- ◆ *My Religion is Hated*

Fighter

- ◆ *Enemy from Fighter Academy*
- ◆ *Old Wounds and Telltale Scars*
- ◆ *Brand of a Criminal*
- ◆ *Desperate to Prove Myself to my Old Mentor*

Thief

- ◆ *Brand of a Criminal*
- ◆ *Thieves' Guild has a Price on My Head*
- ◆ *In Love with the Magistrate's Son/Daughter*

Wizard

- ◆ *Illegal, Runaway Mage* (a mage that was captured by the Church and later successfully escaped)
- ◆ *Wildborn and Naive* (a mage that was never captured by the Church and forced to work)

First, if I intended this option from the outset, I'd let everyone know both menus, in case a particular trouble sounded especially appealing. Here, the sorts of storylines for the Cleric and Wizard are intended to be more about their roles' relationships to the broad world overall, and the ones for the Fighter and Thief more about local community or individuals. Note that I added explanation call-outs for the wizard troubles (which are lifted heavily from BioWare's fantastic *Dragon Age* game series).

I also intentionally made the lists unbalanced, to show that you can do that without breaking this dynamic.

Ask Questions Afterward

As the last part of this setup, your job as a GM is to ask a couple questions after the high concept and trouble are picked and before moving onto the phases. This ties the high concept and trouble together into a character seed, and that will help everyone move onto the phases.

When coming up with questions, it's fine—and sometimes necessary—to have questions that focus on the past, but you also need ones that focus on the immediate situation or what just happened a day or moment before the play begins. In particular, this puts troubles in a timely context, since they're ongoing issues that characters may have to deal with in any given situation.

This section is more art than formula, because you don't want to necessarily write a host of questions you're not likely to use (unless you're making something for publication rather than for a single game.)

Three Questions from 1920s American Noir

- ◆ ***Crooked Cop + Gambling Debts***: Who is your character in debt to? What will happen if you don't pay by Friday?
- ◆ ***Hard-Boiled Journalist + Survivor's Guilt***: Who died, and how long ago? What happened on Monday to make you cry or anguish all over again?
- ◆ ***Well-Known Fixer + Rocky Marriage***: Which of your assets or connections is your spouse sleeping with? Why haven't you done anything about it?

Three Questions from Fantasy Adventurers

- ◆ ***Cleric + My Religion is Hated***: What's the telltale sign of your faith, and how do you hide it? What are you afraid of happening if others discover this?
- ◆ ***Thief + In Love with the Magistrate's Daughter***: What foolish thing have you done recently to win her smile? How did that get you into trouble?
- ◆ ***Wizard + Illegal, Runaway Mage***: What's the name of the warden hunting you down? What stories do your kind tell of him or her?

There are many different ways to extend this concept—for any genre, shape of story arc, and length of game. You could tie other choices to casting as well, such as particular skills, approaches, or stunts; either the permissions concept in *The Dresden Files Roleplaying Game*, where a given high concept

is required for certain abilities, or as picking a given choice inherently gives the character a rank or stunt. Likewise, these choices could feed into separate phase trios, rather than everyone answering the same one.

On the other hand, this tool helps players of one-shots and convention games feel like their characters are truly *theirs*, rather than someone else's simply handed to them. That's great for generating emotional investment in such short-term play. However you use it, though, it's a very versatile tool.

