

RUNNING THE GAME

WHAT YOU DO

If you're the gamemaster, then your job is a little different from everyone else's. This chapter is going to give you a bunch of tools to make that job easier during play.

START AND END SCENES

One of your primary responsibilities during the game is to decide definitively when a scene begins and ends. This might not seem like that big a deal, but it is, because it means that you're the person primarily responsible for the pacing of each session. If you start scenes too early, it takes a long time to get to the main action. If you don't end them soon enough, then they drag on and it takes you a long time to get anything significant done.

We have more advice on starting and ending scenes in the next chapter, *Scenes, Sessions, and Scenarios*.

Drama Is Better Than Realism: In *Fate*, don't get too bogged down trying to maintain absolute consistency in the world or adhere to a draconian sense of realism. The game operates by the rules of drama and fiction; use that to your advantage. There should be very few moments in the game where the PCs are free of conflicts or problems to deal with, even if it'd be more "realistic" for them to get a long breather.

PLAY THE WORLD AND THE NPCs

The PCs' aspects also help you decide how to make the world respond to them. As stated in the *Aspects and Fate Points* chapter, the best aspects have a double edge to them. You have a lot of power to exploit that double edge by using event-based compels. That way, you kill two birds with one stone—you add detail and surprise to your game world, but you also keep the PCs at the center of the story you're telling.

Let the Players Help You:

Amanda: "Well, you know that it's using their life force to power itself. If there were a way to do that, what do you think it'd look like? I mean, you're the expert wizard, you tell me."

Amanda: "Yeah, that sounds good. Roll Lore to see if that's there."

You also judge the appropriateness of any invocations or compels that come up during play, like we talked about in the *Aspects and Fate Points* chapter, and make sure that everyone at the table is clear on what's going on. With invocations, this is pretty easy—as long as the player can explain why the aspect is relevant, you're good to go. With compels, it can get a little more complicated, because you need to articulate precisely what complication the player is agreeing to.

You're the Chairman, Not God: Your job is really to have the "last word" on any rules-related subject, rather than to dictate from your chair. Keep that in mind.

CREATE SCENARIOS (AND NEARLY EVERYTHING ELSE)

This job gets a whole chapter all on its own. See *Scenes, Sessions, and Scenarios*.

WHAT TO DO DURING GAME CREATION

Of course, if everyone's amenable, there's nothing stopping you from showing up with a clear vision of exactly what you want to run. "Okay, this is going to be a game about the Cold War in the '60s, except it's all steampunk and mechs. Go!" Just make sure everyone's on board if you go that route. Even one player who isn't into it, and doesn't really feel inclined to get into it, can really affect the game.

Out There vs. Down Here and Top Down vs. Bottom Up: If you're going bottom-up, you'll start with whatever's immediately important to the PCs. That might be anything from a few notable NPCs in their hometown to the name of the guy who works in the next cubicle over. Then the group figures out the details as the story goes along. There's no need to have an idea of how things fit into the world, because everyone will make that up as you go. The world just spirals out from whatever you start with.

Fate can handle either, but the system's support for player-driven contributions to the narrative in the form of aspects and story details really makes the bottom-up method sing. If that's the way you like to play anyway, great! If not, no pressure—but give it a try sometime.

Small Scale vs. Large Scale: As laid out in that chapter, small-scale stories concern events closely connected to the PCs, and probably within a very limited geographical area. Large-scale games are the opposite: epic tales spanning nations, planets, or galaxies with world(s)-shaking consequences. Both types of stories can be a lot of fun—winning the title of Grand Emperor of the Galactic Reach can be just as rewarding as winning the hand of the prettiest girl in the village.

WHAT TO DO DURING PLAY

Now that you've gone through the process of game creation with the players, let's take a detailed look at how to approach your various jobs during a session of play.

The Golden Rule: Decide what you're trying to accomplish first, then consult the rules to help you do it. This might seem like common sense, but we call it out because the order is important. In other words, don't look at the rules as a straitjacket or a hard limit on an action. Instead, use them as a variety of potential tools to model whatever you're trying to do. Your intent, whatever it is, always takes precedence over the mechanics.

But sometimes, you're going to get into situations where it's not immediately clear what type of action is the most appropriate. As a GM, don't respond to these situations by forbidding the action. Instead, try to nail down a specific intent, in order to point more clearly to one (or more) of the basic game actions.

The Silver Rule: The corollary to the Golden Rule is as follows: Never let the rules get in the way of what makes narrative sense. If you or the players narrate something in the game and it makes sense to apply a certain rule outside of the normal circumstances where you would do so, go ahead and do it.

But say you're in a scene where a player decides that, as part of trying to intimidate his way past someone, his PC is going to punch through a glass-top table with a bare fist. It's totally fine to assign a mild consequence of Glass in My Hand in that case, because it fits with the narration, even though there's no conflict and nothing technically attacked the PC.

Lily says, “Well, there’s nothing for it. I’m going after the idol. I take off down the hall, keeping my eye out for fiery death bolts.”

So Amanda asks, “Lily, we need to go to dice, but what exactly do you want to accomplish here? Are you mainly trying to make sure you don’t get hit, or are you blasting through the hall to get to the idol?”

Amanda asks, “So you’re willing to take damage in the process?”

Amanda says, “Okay, so we can do it in one roll. Here’s how we’ll handle it. You roll Athletics against Fantastic (+6) opposition. If you make it, you’re through the trap and don’t take any harm. If you don’t make it, you’re stuck in the hallway and will have to try again to make it all the way through. We’re also going to treat that failure like a failed defense roll, so you’re going to take a hit as well. Because of all the fiery death and whatnot.”

In this example, Amanda combined effects from overcome and defend to determine what happens to Cynere. This is totally okay, because it fits their intent and it makes sense given the situation they described. She might have decided to do both rolls separately, and that would have been fine too—she just wanted to get it all into one roll.

When to Roll Dice

Roll the dice when succeeding or failing at the action could each contribute something interesting to the game.

The worst, worst thing you can do is have a failed roll that means nothing happens—no new knowledge, no new course of action to take, and no change in the situation. That is totally boring, and it discourages players from investing in failure—something you absolutely want them to do, given how important compels and the concession mechanic are. Do not do this.

Situation Aspects Are Your Friend: For example, if a character is trying to sprint quickly across a room, and you have a situation aspect like Cluttered Floors, it makes sense to ask for a roll before they can move. If there is no such aspect, just let them make the move and get on to something more interesting.

Making Failure Awesome

Succeed at a Cost: You can also offer to give the PCs what they want, but at a price—in this case, the failed roll means they weren’t able to achieve their goals without consequence. One way you can do this is by taking a minor cost to the next level. Instead of suspecting that a guard heard them open the vault, a few guards burst in the room, weapons drawn. Instead of being merely cut off from their allies by a collapsing ceiling, one or more of those allies ends up buried in the debris. Instead of merely having to face an awkward situation with Berthold, he’s still angry and out for their blood.

Let the Player Do the Work

You can also kick the question back to the players, and let them decide what the context of their own failure is. This is a great move to foster a collaborative spirit, and some players will be surprisingly eager to hose their own characters in order to further the story, especially if it means they can keep control of their own portrayal.

Setting Difficulties

When you’re setting passive opposition for an action, keep in mind the difficulty “break points” that we mentioned in Actions and Outcomes—anything that’s two or more steps above the PC’s skill is probably going to cost them fate points, and anything that’s two or more below the PC’s skill will be a breeze.

Setting the difficulty right at the PC’s skill level is, as you might imagine, sort of a middle ground between these two extremes. Do this when you want some tension without turning things up to 11, or when the odds are slightly in the PC’s favor but you want a tangible element of risk.

Important: Justify Your Choices. Either let the players know what it is immediately when you tell them the difficulty, or shrug mysteriously and then let them find out soon thereafter (as in, the time it takes to think it up).

Dealing with Extraordinary Success

Or maybe you're trying to finish the famed initiation test of the scholastic Amethyst Order, and the test is only a Fair (+2) Lore roll—what's the deal? Are they going easy on you? Is your appointment a political necessity? Who pulled the strings on that? Or is it just that the reputation of the Order's scholars is a fabrication?

For others, it's not so clear. What's happens when you get a lot of shifts on a Crafts roll or an Investigate roll? You want to make sure those results have some kind of meaning and reflect how competent the PC's are.

Dealing with Time

Game Time: Game time is how we organize play in terms of the real players sitting at the table. Each unit of game time corresponds to a certain amount of real time.

Story Time: Sometimes, though, you can use story time in creative ways to create tension and surprise during the game.

Deadline Pressure: Some of the game's default actions are made to take advantage of deadline pressure, such as challenges or contests—they each limit the number of rolls that a player can make before something happens, for better or for worse.

Of course, it'd be no fun if there was nothing they could do to improve a deadline situation, and it'd be no fun if the crawl toward the deadline was predictable.

Using Story Time in Success and Failure: Taking extra time is a great way to make failure awesome as per the guidelines above, especially using the "Success at a Cost" option—give the players exactly what they want, but at the cost of taking more time than they were trying to spend, thus risking that their efforts will come too late. Or it could be the thing that pushes a deadline over the edge—maybe things aren't completely hopeless, but now there are extra problems to deal with.

If time is a factor, you should also be able to use invocations and compels to manipulate time, to make things easier or more complicated respectively. ("Hey, I'm a Garage Bunny, so fixing this car shouldn't take me that long, right?" "Oh, you know what? Your sheet says I Can't Get Enough of the Fun and Games... doesn't it make sense that if you're looking for a guy in a casino, it'd be easy to get caught up in distractions? All those machines and stuff...")

How Much Time Is a Shift Worth? Just like with any other roll, the number of shifts you get (or the amount you fail by) should serve as a barometer for just how severe the time jump is. So, how do you decide just how much to award or penalize? We recommend you measure in the abstract and express all the game actions as half, one, a few, or several of a given unit of time. So if you imagine something taking six hours, think of it as "several hours." If you imagine something taking twenty minutes, you can either call that "several minutes" or round up to "half an hour", whichever feels closest.

Going past either end of the spectrum moves you down to several increments of the next unit of time or up to half the next unit of time, depending on which direction you're going. So four shifts on the aforementioned roll might jump you from "several hours" to "several minutes." Failing by one, conversely, might jump you from "several hours" to "half a day."

Story Time and the Scope of an Action: It's easy to think of most actions that a PC takes being limited to anything that the character can directly affect, and working on a "person-to-person" scope. And most of the time, that's going to be precisely the case—after all, Fate is a game about individual competence shining in the face of dramatic adversity.

Remember that if you do this with a conflict or a contest, that you scale each exchange appropriately—if a conflict is taking place over the course of a year, then each exchange might be a month or two, and everyone should describe their actions and the results of their actions in that context.

They decide to do it as a conflict, with each exchange representing one confrontation between Landon and the Shroud's trackers. It goes badly for him and he concedes, taking a moderate consequence into the next session. Amanda suggests that they want to bring Landon back into the fold rather than hurt or kill him, so Lenny decides to take I Don't Know What's Right Anymore, reflecting the seeds of doubt they're planting in his mind.

Zoom In, Zoom Out: There's no rule that says you're required to keep your rolls consistent in terms of story time. One cool trick you can do is use the result of one roll to segue into another roll that takes place over a much smaller period in time, or vice versa. This is a great way to open a new scene, contest, or conflict, or just introduce a change of pace.

During the aforementioned six-month break, Cynere has been researching the demon compatriots of the horrific Arc'yeth, who soul-burned her in the last arc of the campaign. She decides to go it alone, even though Zird offered to help, and ends up rolling her newly acquired Average (+1) Lore to succeed at an overcome roll.

Lily says, "Well, hell, I get up and rush in there, grabbing my sword as I go!"

Lily says, "Oh, hell no. I'm going after him. Her, it, them, whatever."

The contest goes badly for Cynere, and the person gets away. Lily immediately says, "Screw that. Someone in town has to know something, or he left some clue behind, or something. I'm going to roll Investigate."

(GMs, see what happened? One roll jumped a week, but Amanda and Lily are playing it at the table in continuous time.)

Amanda says, "Everyone backs away from a lithe woman at the bar, who sneers at them and goes for her sword, bounding off the stool and aiming a whistling cut at your face."

Judging the Use of Skills and Stunts

By now, you pretty much have all the advice you need to deal with skill and stunt use—the individual descriptions in Skills and Stunts, the action descriptions and examples in Challenges, Contests, and Conflicts, and the advice immediately above about setting difficulties and how to handle success and failure.

When you run into this, talk it over with the group and see what everyone thinks.

A lot of the criteria you're going to rely on for these conversations will come from the work you and the players did with the skill list at game creation. See Skills and Stunts for advice on figuring out what the limits are for a skill and what the dividing line between a skill and a stunt is.

Ryan says, "I'm going to spend some time in a local library, researching some history about the site. I'd like to use Lore to create an advantage."

"What kind of info are you looking for?" Amanda asks. "Just book report-type details, or...?"

Amanda says, "Oh, cool. Yeah, roll your Lore, opposition is Fair (+2)." Unexpectedly, Ryan rolls a -4 and ends up with a Mediocre (+0), meaning that he failed. Ryan decides not to spend any fate points on the roll.

Ryan says, "If the site is so powerful, how did the village become cursed?"

In her notes, she jots something briefly about the fact that the site is now magically defiled and that the town's priest is keeping that a secret, changing Ryan's suggestion a little bit and adding some material for him if he decides to ask around.

Skills and Specific Measurements

So how much can a character with Great (+4) Physique bench press? How much can a character with Fair (+2) Resources spend before going broke?

Dealing with Conflicts and Other Weird Stuff

Affecting Multiple Targets

Things get more complicated when you want to filter specific targets, rather than just affect a whole zone or scene. When that happens, divide your resulting total up against every target, who all get to defend as per normal. Anyone who fails to defend either takes stress or gains an aspect, depending on what you were trying to do. (Note: If you create an advantage to put an aspect on multiple targets, you do get a free invocation for each one.)

Zird the Arcane is unleashing fiery death upon his foes in a magical fashion, as is his wont. He has three such foes, charging at him across a battlefield. Zird figures it's probably Landon's fault he's found himself in this circumstance.

He knows he wants to get one of them pretty good, so he opts to divide his spread up as Superb (+5), Average (+1), and Average (+1). That adds up to +7, which was his roll, so he's all good. Now Amanda has to defend for all three of them.

The second defender gets a Fair (+2), beating the attack roll. He charges forward undaunted.

Compels and Multiple Targets: Just a quick note: players who want to compel their way out of a conflict don't get a free lunch on affecting multiple targets, whether it's one aspect or several that justify the compel. A player must spend one fate point for each target they wish to compel. One fate point compels one individual, period.

Environmental Hazards

So, what do you do when the PCs go up against something that isn't a character?

Cynere, Landon, and Zird are exploring the Caverns of Kazak-Thorn, in pursuit of one of the demonic opponents that Cynere's been so interested in lately. Of course, the demon princess in question doesn't appreciate being hunted by pesky adventurers and has summoned the powers of darkness to stand between our heroes and herself. So it goes.

"I think I speak for us all when I say 'Yikes,'" Ryan says.

Lily says, "I'm willing to go for it. Let's do this."

DEALING WITH ASPECTS

As with skills and stunts, the entire Aspects and Fate Points chapter is designed to help you judge the use of aspects in the game. As the GM, you have a very important job in managing the flow of fate points to and from the players, giving them opportunities to spend freely in order to succeed and look awesome, and bringing in potential complications to help keep them stocked up on points.

Invocations

On the other hand, feel free to ask for more clarification if you don't get what a player is implying, in terms of how the aspect relates to what's happening in play. Sometimes, what seems obvious to one person isn't to another, and you shouldn't let the desire to toss fate points lead to overlooking the narration. If a player is having a hard time justifying the invocation, ask them to elaborate on their action more or unpack their thoughts.

Compels

During the game, you should look for opportunities to compel the PCs' aspects at the following times: of the two, you're going to get the most mileage out of event-based compels—it's already your job to decide how the world responds to the PCs, so you have a lot of leeway to bring unfortunate coincidence into their lives. Most of the time, players are just going to accept you doing this without any problems or minimal negotiation.

Weaksauce Compels: Also, keep in mind that some players may tend to offer weak compels when they're fishing for fate points, because they don't really want to hose their character that badly. Feel free to push for something harder if their initial proposal doesn't actually make the situation that much more dramatic.

Encouraging the Players to Compel: Open-ended prompting can go a long way to create this habit in your players. If you see an opportunity for a potential compel, instead of proposing it directly, ask a leading question instead. "So, you're at the royal ball and you have The Manners of a Goat. Lenny, do you think this is going to go smoothly for your character?" Let the player do the work of coming up with the complication and then pass the fate point along.

Your main goal should be to enlist the players as partners in bringing the drama, rather than being the sole provider.

As a GM, you want to shoot for a balancing act with the opposing NPCs—you want the players to experience tension and uncertainty, but you don't want their defeat to be a foregone conclusion. You want them to work for it, but you don't want them to lose hope.

CREATING THE OPPOSITION

THE NPC TYPES

Nameless NPCs

These thugs are nameless NPCs with Notice and Fight skills of Average (+1).

Normally Cynere's Good (+3) Notice would allow her to act first, but Amanda reasons that the thugs' ability to surround the PCs gives them the drop. In a big group of six, their Average (+1) Notice is increased by +5 to a Fantastic (+6).

Cynere goes next. Lily says, "In a flash, Cynere's sword is in hand and slicing through these punks!" She gets a Great (+4) result with her Fight. Amanda's first thug mob defends with a Good (+3) (+0 on the dice, Average skill, with +2 for the helpers), so Cynere deals one shift to the mob—enough to take one of them out. There are still two in the mob, though, so they only get +1 for the helper when they attack next.

Nameless NPCs as Obstacles: If the situation is more complicated than that, make it a challenge instead. This trick is useful when you want a group of nameless NPCs more as a feature of the scene than as individuals.

Zird wants to convince a group of mages that continuing their research into the Dark Void will doom them all, and possibly the world. Amanda doesn't want to deal with him needing to convince each mage individually, so she makes a challenge out of them.

Mobs

NPC First, Name Later

Trained Thug (Fair) Aspects: The Ways of the Streets, Violent Criminal Skills: Fair (+2) Fight, Average (+1) Athletics and Physique

Supporting NPCs

Skill Levels: A supporting NPC's top skill can exceed your best PC's by one or two levels, but only if their role in the game is to provide serious opposition—supporting NPCs who are allied with the PCs should be their rough peers in skill level. (Another action-adventure trope is to make the “lieutenant” character better than the main villain at combat, contrasting brawn to the villain's brain.)

Teran the Swift, Thief Extraordinaire Aspects: Cutpurse and Scoundrel, I Just Can't Help Myself Skills: Superb (+5) Burglary, Great (+4) Stealth, Good (+3) Lore, Fair (+2) Fight, Average (+1) Physique [Note: 3 physical stress boxes] Stunts: Inside Man. +2 to Stealth in an indoor, urban environment.

Main NPCs

Regarding skill levels, your main NPCs will come in one of two flavors—exact peers of the PCs who grow with them as the campaign progresses, or superiors to the PCs who remain static while the PCs grow to sufficient strength to oppose them. If it's the former, just give them the exact same skill distribution the PCs currently have. If it's the latter, give them enough skills to go at least two higher than whatever the current skill cap is for the game.

Likewise, a particularly significant NPC might have more than five aspects to highlight their importance to the story.

Barathar, Smuggler Queen of the Sindral Reach Skills: Fantastic (+6) Deceive and Fight Superb (+5) Shoot and Burglary Great (+4) Resources and Will Good (+3) Contacts and Notice Fair (+2) Crafts and Stealth Average (+1) Lore and Physique

PLAYING THE OPPOSITION

Here are some tips for using the opposition characters you create in play. Right-sizing the opposition is more of an art than a science.

Creating Advantages for NPCs

It's easy to fall into the default mode of using the opposition as a direct means to get in the PCs' way, drawing them into a series of conflict scenes until someone is defeated.

Likewise, keep in mind that your NPCs have a home turf advantage in conflicts if the PCs go to them in order to resolve something. So, when you're setting up situation aspects, you can pre-load the NPC with some free invocations if it's reasonable that they've had time to place those aspects. Use this trick in good faith, though—two or three such aspects is probably pushing the limit.

Change Venues of Conflict

For example, someone going after Landon probably doesn't want to confront him physically, because Fight and Athletics are his highest skills. He's not as well equipped to see through a clever deception, however, or handle a magical assault on his mind. Zird, on the other hand, is best threatened by the biggest, nastiest bruiser possible, someone who can strike at him before he has a chance to bring his magic to bear.

DEFINING SCENARIOS

As mentioned in *Running the Game*, a scenario is a unit of game time usually lasting from one to four sessions, and made up of a number of discrete scenes. The end of a scenario should trigger a significant milestone, allowing your PCs to get better at what they do.

Along the way, you'll also have some NPCs who are opposed to the PCs' goals interfere with their attempts to solve the problem. These could be your Raymond Chandler-esque "two guys with guns" bursting through the door to kill them, or simply someone with different interests who wants to negotiate with the PCs in order to get them to deal with the problem in a different way.

Once the problem is resolved (or it can no longer be resolved), the scenario is over. The following session, you'll start a new scenario, which can either relate directly to the previous scenario or present a whole new problem.

Creating a Scenario: Step by Step

- ♦ Find Problems
- ♦ Ask Story Questions
- ♦ Establish the Opposition
- ♦ Set the First Scene

Find Problems

Creating a scenario begins with finding a problem for the PCs to deal with. A good problem is relevant to the PCs, cannot be resolved without their involvement, and cannot be ignored without dire consequences.

Your PCs' aspects have a lot of story built into them—they're an indication of what's important about (and to) each character, they indicate what things in the game world the PCs are connected to, and they describe the unique facets of each character's identity.

Because of all these aspects, you already have a ton of story potential sitting right in front of you—now, you just have to unlock it.

You Don't Always Have to Destroy the World: If you want a classic action-adventure story setup, see if you can come up with two main problems for your scenario—one that focuses on something external to the characters (like the villain's scheme), and one that deals with interpersonal issues. The latter will serve as a subplot in your scenario and give the characters some development time while they're in the midst of dealing with other problems.

Problems and Character Aspects

You have ____ aspect, which implies ____ (and this may be a list of things, by the way). Because of that, ____ would probably be a big problem for you. The second blank is what makes this a little harder than an event compel—you have to think about all the different potential implications of an aspect.

Cynere has Infamous Girl With Sword, which implies that her reputation precedes her across the countryside. Because of that, a copycat committing crimes in her name and getting the inhabitants of the next city she visits angry and murderous would probably be a big problem for her.

Zird has Rivals in the Collegia Arcana, which implies that some or many of them are scheming against him constantly. Because of that, a series of concentrated assassination attempts from someone or several people who know how to get past all his magical defenses would probably be a big problem for him.

Problems and Game Aspects

Because ____ is an issue, it implies _____. Therefore, ____ would probably create a big problem for the PCs.

Because The Doom that Is to Come is an issue, it implies that agents of the Cult of Tranquility are constantly trying to fulfill parts of the ancient prophecies that foretell the doom. Therefore, a series of ritual murders in the next town meant to awaken an ancient demon that sleeps under the town would probably create a big problem for the PCs.

Problems and Aspect Pairs

This is where you really start cooking with gas. You can also create problems from the relationship between two aspects instead of relying on just one. That lets you keep things personal, but broaden the scope of your problem to impact multiple characters, or thread a particular PC's story into the story of the game.

Two Character Aspects

Because Cynere is Tempted by Shiny Things, and Landon has The Manners of a Goat, it implies that they're probably the worst partners for any kind of undercover heist. Therefore, a contract to infiltrate the Royal Ball of Ictherya with no backup and walk out with the Crown Jewels on behalf of a neighboring kingdom would probably be a big problem for them.

Character Aspect and Issue

Because you have [] aspect and [] is an issue, it implies that []. Therefore, [] would probably be a big problem for you.

- ◆ Does the issue suggest a threat to any of the PC's relationships?

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- ◆ Is the next step to dealing with the issue something that impacts a particular character personally because of their aspects?

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- ◆ Does someone connected to the issue have a particular reason to target the PC because of an aspect?

Because Cynere is the Secret Sister of Barathar and The Scar Triad is an issue, it implies that the Triad could have leverage over Cynere for blackmail. Therefore, the Triad hiring her for an extremely dangerous and morally reprehensible job on the threat of revealing her secret to the world and making her a public enemy across the land would probably be a big problem for her.

Because Landon has An Eye for an Eye, and The Doom that Is to Come is an issue, it implies that anything the Cult does to Landon's loved ones would be met with a desire for vengeance. Therefore, an attack on his hometown by Cult agents on the prowl for more indoctrinated servants as preparation for the End Times would probably be a big problem for him.

How Many Problems Do I Need? For a single scenario, one or two is sufficient, trust us. You'll see below that even one problem can create enough material for two or three sessions. Don't feel like you have to engage every PC with every scenario—rotate the spotlight around a little so that they each get some spotlight time, and then throw in an issue-related scenario when you want to concentrate on the larger “plot” of the game.

Ask Story Questions

That's what you'll do in this step: create a series of questions that you want your scenario to answer. We call these story questions, because the story will emerge naturally from the process of answering them.

We recommend asking story questions as yes/no questions, in the general format of, “Can/Will (character) accomplish (goal)?” You don't have to follow that phrasing exactly, and you can embellish on the basic question format in a number of ways.

To come up with story questions, you're probably going to have to embellish on the problem that you came up with just a bit, and figure out some of the W-How (who, what, when, where, why, how) details. That's also fine, and part of what the process is for.

Two obvious story questions spring to mind already: Will Cynere get the treasure? Will Zird win his trial? But Amanda wants to save those answers for the end, so she brainstorms some other questions.

Then, she needs to figure out why they can't just go straight to the problem. She decides Cynere has an anonymous rival for the treasure (let's call it the Jewel of Aetheria, that sounds nice), and her mysterious employer would be most displeased if the rival beat her to the punch.

So, that gives her three more questions: Can Cynere sniff out her competitor before her competitor does the same to her? Can Zird find an ally to defend him among the Collegia's ranks? Can Zird discover the architects of the conspiracy without suffering further consequences?

Notice that each of these questions has the potential to significantly shape the scenario's plot. Right off the bat, if Zird decides not to go quietly, you have a very different situation than if he chooses to submit to custody. If Zird's investigations get him arrested, then the trial might end up being a moot point. If Cynere decides to help Zird rather than pursuing the Jewel, then they're going to have another source of trouble in the form of Cynere's employer.

Look at one of the questions for Cynere: “Will Cynere discover the identity of her chief competitor for the Jewel before the competitor discovers hers?” Without the emphasized part, it'd be kind of boring—if she fails to discover her opponent's identity, then we've pretty much dropped that plot thread, and part of the game stalls out. No good.

There's also some room to extend material from this scenario into the future. Maybe the identity of Cynere's opponent doesn't get answered this session at all—that's okay, because it's a detail Amanda can always bring back in a later session.

Establish the Opposition

You might have already come up with an NPC or group of NPCs who is/are responsible for what's going on when you made up your problem, but if you haven't, you need to start putting together the cast of characters who are the key to answering your story questions. You also need to nail down their motivations and goals, why they're standing in opposition to the PCs' goals, and what they're after.

- ♦ What does that NPC need? How can the PCs help her get that, or how are the PCs in the way?

- ♦ Why can't the NPC get what she needs through legitimate means? (In other words, why is this need contributing to a problem?)

- ♦ Why can't she be ignored?

For each NPC that you have, decide whether you need to make them a supporting or main NPC. Stat them up according to the guidelines given in *Running the Game*.

Then she decides that the chief arbiter and the architect of the conspiracy are the same—he didn't trust anyone else to stick the final nail in Zird's coffin, so he made sure he'd be appointed arbiter over the trial. Amanda likes this because his political power makes him a formidable opponent to investigate and gives him a powerful lackey in the form of the corrupt barrister.

As for the corrupt barrister, the first thing that comes to mind is a pathetic, sniveling toady who is totally in the arbiter's pocket. But she wants to add a measure of depth to him, so she also decides that the arbiter has blackmail material on him, which helps to ensure his loyalty. She doesn't know what that info is yet, but she's hoping that nosy PCs will help her figure it out through a story detail later.

Set Up the First Scene

Start things off by being as unsubtle as possible—take one of your story questions, come up with something that will bring the question into sharp relief, and hit your players over the head with it as hard as you can. You don't have to answer it right off the bat (though there's nothing wrong with that, either), but you should show the players that the question demands an answer.

If you're in an ongoing campaign, you might need the first scenes of a session to resolve loose ends that were left hanging from a previous session. It's okay to spend time on that, because it helps keep the sense of continuity going from session to session. As soon as there's a lull in momentum, though, hit them with your opening scene fast and hard.

Let's look at our example scenes above. The prompts don't specify where the PCs are when they get confronted with their first choices. So, Amanda might start the session by asking Ryan, "Where exactly is Zird when the brute squad from the Collegia comes looking for him?"

"Perfect!" says Amanda, and holds out a fate point. "So, it'd make sense that your Rivals in the Collegia Arcana would have divined precisely the right time to catch you away from all your magical implements and gear, right?"

"Zird, it's bad enough when your Rivals in the Collegia Arcana give you trouble, but when they pretend to be peasants in the local watering hole, get you drunk, and start a bar fight so they can haul you somewhere secluded, it's even worse. You wake up with a five-alarm hangover and a black eye—someone punched you in the face!" (2 fate points, for Rivals and Not the Face!)

"Cynere, whoever decided to make you this contract offer knows you pretty well. They've included several large gems along with the contract. Problem is, you also know what noble house they were stolen from, and there's no doubt you'll be a wanted woman if you don't sign—and you're infamous enough that you know no one's going to believe how you came by them." (2 fate points for Infamous Girl with Sword and Tempted by Shiny Things.)

DEFINING SCENES

So you can look at it as the foundational unit of game time, and you probably already have a good idea of what one looks like. It's not all that different from a scene in a movie, a television show, or a novel—the main characters are doing stuff in continuous time, usually all in the same space. Once the action shifts to a new goal, moves to a new place related to that goal, or jumps in time, you're in the next scene.

Starting Scenes

When you're starting a scene, establish the following two things as clearly as you can: what's the purpose of this scene, and what's the next bit of interesting action to come.

Now Amanda's thinking about how to start things off next time. The whole situation seems to have really freaked the players out, so she definitely wants to capitalize on that. She figures Anna should return, initially confused about Cynere's role in the theft and ready to fight. The scene will be about coming to an accord with Anna and realizing that they're both on the same side, as it were.

Amanda starts the scene with Cynere and Landon walking back to their lodgings late at night, engrossed in conversation about recent events. Lenny suggests they're not staying at an inn anymore—not after the theft. He figures everyone from the Collegia wizards to the Cult of Tranquility will be looking for Cynere, so they're holed up somewhere safe.

"Whoa!" Lily says. "How'd they know we were going to be here?"

"Fair enough," Lenny says, and they both accept the compel.

If you have a clear purpose going into every scene and you start just before some significant piece of action, it's hard to go wrong.

Ending Scenes

This is an effective approach mainly because it helps you sustain interest for the next scene. Again, you see this all the time in good movies—a scene will usually end with a certain piece of action resolved, but also with a lingering bit of business that's left unresolved, and that's where they cut to next.

Instead of lingering at that scene, though, suggest that they move on to a new one, which helps answer one of the unresolved questions from the current scene. Try to get them to state what they want to do next, and then go back to the two questions for starting scenes above—what's the purpose of the next scene, and what's the next bit of interesting action to come? Then dive right into that.

Using the Pillars (Competence, Proactivity, Drama): Whenever you're trying to come up with ideas for what should happen in a scene, you should think about the basic ideas of Fate that we talked about in The Basics—competence, proactivity, and drama.

Cynere's first impulse is to find out what Anna's talking about—but Amanda knows Landon's impulses are... a little more violent.

"But... we just started talking," Lily says.

Hit Their Aspects

Another good way to figure out the interesting action for a scene is to turn to the PCs' aspects, and create a complication or an event-based compel based on them. This is especially good to do for those PCs whose aspects did not come into play when you made up your scenario problem, because it allows them to have some of the spotlight despite the fact that the overall story does not focus on them as much.

The scene opens on the big trial. Zird stands before a panel of wizards in the Great Hall of the Collegia Arcana. While they pepper him with questions, every now and then a wizard in the gallery throws out a follow-up, an insult, or a word of discouragement. The whole thing's like a lively session of the British Parliament. Cynere and Landon stand in the gallery, following the proceedings as best they can.

"You're right! I can't take it anymore!" Lily says. "I've Got Zird's Back!"

Amanda tosses Lily a fate point. "Nice."

THE SCENARIO IN PLAY

Everything should be smooth sailing from here, right? You present the questions, the players gradually answer them, and your story rolls into a nice, neat conclusion.

The most important thing to remember when you actually get the scenario off the ground is this: whatever happens will always be different from what you expect. The PCs will hate an NPC you intended them to befriend, have wild successes that give away a bad guy's secrets very early, suffer unexpected setbacks that change the course of their actions, or any one of another hundred different things that just don't end up the way you think they should.

Not all is lost, however—the stuff you have prepared should help you tremendously when players do something unexpected. Your story questions are vague enough that there are going to be multiple ways to answer each one, and you can very quickly axe one that isn't going to be relevant and replace it with something else on the fly without having to toss the rest of your work.

Amanda had expected that the scene with Landon, Cynere, and Anna would result in a briefly violent reaction, thanks to Landon, followed by the PCs explaining that they're not with the Cult of Tranquility and everyone realizing that they're all on the same side.

The first swing of Landon's sword fells Anna where she stands, killing what would've been their first contact with the Sun and Moon Society, an important secret organization opposing the cult. Plus, Anna's companions are now convinced that he and Cynere are indeed cultists.

Also, knowing your NPCs' motivations and goals allows you to adjust their behavior more easily than if you'd just placed them in a static scene waiting for the PCs to show up. When the players throw you a curveball, make the NPCs as dynamic and reactive as they are, by having them take sudden, surprising action in pursuit of their goals.

She decides that, while the death of a member of the Sun and Moon Society would go unnoticed by most of Riverton, a guy like Hugo the Charitable would certainly hear about it. He'd already taken notice of Landon after he fought off a few Scar Triad goons. And now this. This newcomer is clearly dangerous, potentially a threat. Worst, he doesn't seem to be working for anyone.

RESOLVING THE SCENARIO

A scenario ends when you've run enough scenes to definitively answer most of the story questions you came up with when you were preparing your scenario. Sometimes you'll be able to do that in a single session if you have a lot of time or only a few questions. If you have a lot of questions, it'll probably take you two or three sessions to get through them all.

The end of a scenario usually triggers a significant milestone. When this happens, you should also see if the game world needs advancing too.