

THE FUGUE SYSTEM

Narrative rules for amnesia stories

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Introduction

You haul yourself up to consciousness. Your mouth is full of dirt. Your body is covered with it, the weight pressing you down into the earth. As your mind claws its way to the surface your arms are instinctively doing the same, scrabbling through the loose soil to the air above you.

You break through, exploding into the cold night like a body reborn, your lungs burning for oxygen, pulling yourself out of the shallow grave beneath you.

You're in the desert: blasted earth and thin brush, with mountains in the far distance. The soulless moon gives faint light to the scene. There are more people here. Naked like you, dirt-stained, silently watching. Behind you in the grave another body lurches upright, someone else returning to the world.

Who buried you for dead, here in this wilderness? How did you get to this place? Why can't you remember?

Why can't you remember anything?

On the horizon is a scar of neon in the shape of a city, pulsing like something not quite alive. A red beam stretches between the land and the infinity of the night sky, reaching to the stars. Sometimes it flickers.

There will be answers there.

About the Fugue System

The **Fugue System** is a set of narrative game mechanics usually referred to as 'RPG rules', designed to let a group of players experience a particular type of interactive game-story.

Fugue was created by James Wallis and was originally devised to power his blast-format game *Alas Vegas*. However it can also be used for other games including *Yet Already* by Gareth Hanrahan, *Warlock Kings* by Johnstone Metzger and Allen Varney, and *Remembering Cosmic Man* by Laurent Devernay and Jerome Larre. The Fugue mechanics have also been released under a Creative Commons licence, allowing other people to use them in their own published material. There is more information about this on pages 24–27.

Fugue is a mechanical engine that lets you construct and tell the story of a group of people who begin the story with complete amnesia, and who regain their memories of themselves, their pasts, their connections, their abilities and their secrets as the story goes on. What really differentiates it from most RPGs is that it's built to tell a story that lasts a pre-determined amount of time (in *Alas Vegas* that's four sessions), and leads to a definite ending. Where most RPGs are soap operas, ongoing and open-ended with characters entering and leaving the narrative, a Fugue game is more like an HBO miniseries: there's a fixed number of episodes and you're done.

Fugue is a narrative game system: it is designed to let players tell a story through collaborative play. That doesn't mean that success is inevitable, and it definitely doesn't mean that it's just about making stuff up. The game, together with whichever content-set you're playing it with (and for the sake of ease and examples we'll assume it's *Alas Vegas*) is designed to provide a group of players with a set of rules to act as a foundation, plus a background and narrative framework that lets them build their stories on top of that foundation. Like most RPG adventures its replayability isn't high. There's nothing to stop you continuing to play in the world of a particular Fugue content-set after the end of the written story, but the system is not designed for it.

To play a Fugue game like *Alas Vegas* you will need these rules, plus a Fugue content-set, some other players, some free time, and some paper and pens. You will also need a deck of tarot cards with unique imagery on each card, such as the Rider Waite deck (some tarot decks don't have proper illustrations for the minor arcana – a deck where the Seven of Wands just has a picture of seven wands on it is no good in Fugue), as well as something to write with and something to write on.

Fugue is pronounced 'few-gh'. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the only word that rhymes with 'fugue' is 'fugue', so imagine it rhymes with 'new-gh'.

Structure

Fugue and its content-sets form a post-Gygax/Arneson role-playing game (i.e. a games master and several players; the games master controls the setting and story while the players control individual characters within the setting) designed to last four sessions of play, each 3–4 hours long. The player-characters begin with no idea of who they are, where they are, how they got there or what they are meant to do. By the end of the last session they should have discovered most of the answers, they will have learned what it is they need to do to conclude their stories in this place, and with a bit of luck will have brought them to a satisfactory end.

A Fugue game needs one player to act as a games master (known as the Dealer) to guide the story and adjudicate on the action. However there is not one single games master who oversees every session of the game. Instead a different player takes the role of the Dealer for each of the four chapters, with no knowledge of what will come later in the plot.

The reason is that most Fugue content-sets contain secrets, plot twists and revelations, and because of the structure of the game it can be difficult not to give them away by accident to the players. But you can't give up what you don't know. If a different player runs each part of the game then the surprises will still be a surprise. Additionally, it means each session will have a different style and tone, depending on the game-running techniques and foibles of that Dealer.

Starting the Game

Before you begin playing a Fugue game, the players need to agree who the first Dealer will be. That person should read the Fugue rules, the Dealer Advice, the Setting and the first chapter of the Story.

Someone, probably the Dealer, should bring a tarot deck, blank paper and pens to the game session.

Gather.

Everyone but the Dealer should close their eyes.

Read the introductory text out loud.

Commence play.

Character Creation

Player-characters... look, can I say a thing here?

I hate the term ‘player-character’. It is long and ugly. Fifteen letters, five jarring syllables. It’s a core part of every RPG and yet it’s a first-generation term unchanged from the 1970s. It’s clunky and counter-intuitive, and leads to the even-worse ‘non-player character’. It’s such an ungainly term that it encourages people to use the acronyms PC and NPC, which make the body-text of game-books look unbalanced and over-technical.

I also hate RPGs that start off by redefining the basic vocabulary of the form, but on balance I hate ‘player character’ more.

There are two words that are better fits. There’s ‘persona’, and there’s ‘role’ – as in ‘role-playing game’, in which you play a role. But ‘role’ is ambiguous and has too many meanings to be completely clear, so I will be using ‘persona’ and ‘personae’ throughout this game to refer to what other games call ‘player characters’ or ‘PCs’. And ‘game character’ instead of ‘non-player character’ or ‘NPC’. Trust me, you will thank me for this in the long run.

So: all personae start a Fugue game with complete amnesia¹. They cannot remember anything about themselves, including their names. They are blank slates, undefined, unable to recall who they are, where they came from or what they can do. Therefore the persona creation process is simpler than most RPGs: no skills, no equipment, not even a name. Everyone starts with a blank piece of paper. This is their persona sheet.

In *Alas Vegas* the personae begin naked in the desert, shivering in the cold night air, beside the shallow pits they have dug themselves out of. They have nothing and they know nothing. They appear to be uninjured, but they are likely to be confused.

¹ This is known as ‘Hollywood amnesia’ and does not exist in the real world. Amnesia is a complex and often heartbreaking condition with many possible causes and no easy solutions. Fugue does not pretend that its representation of amnesia is anything more than a convenient narrative conceit.

However, just because your persona's sheet is blank doesn't mean there's nothing to say about them. Persona creation boils down to going around the group, each player telling the others what their persona looks like. Everyone creates a persona, including the Dealer, although theirs will be run as a game-character for the first session.

The Fugue group has four players: Scott Barrett, Simon Rogers, Troy Hall and Ursula Moth. Ursula is the first Dealer.

Simon: 'My persona is dark-skinned, but his face looks more Asian than African, particularly around the eyes. He's probably in his late twenties, thin but quite wiry. His hair is shaved. He's got a tattoo on top of some scar tissue on his left arm, something written in Kanji.'

Ursula: 'What does it say?'

Simon: 'Can you read Kanji? I can't.'

(Note that though Simon may have a plan for what his persona's tattoo says, because of the way Fugue's flashback system works – see page 7 – another player or the Dealer may beat him to choosing its meaning.)

All personae in most Fugue games are genre-appropriate normal characters, or at least they start off that way. Nobody has psychic powers or elf DNA or magic or bulletproof skin or cybernetic implants or midichlorians or ninja training or supernatural ancestry or invisible assistants or meta-narrative awareness. But you can describe certain physical features of your persona: their age, gender, hair, scars, build, muscles, skin colour, tattoos or piercings, missing or misshapen appendages, and so on. There may also be marks where something has been removed, such as a wedding ring or an internal organ. (However you are not the guy in *Memento* and your tattoos will not spell out a message to remind you who you are or what's going on.)

To give players some initial cues to work with, they may want to each think of someone their persona resembles physically, and someone they sound like, like a celebrity or historical figure. This is optional but some groups find it useful for getting a quick handle on their persona, and it helps to remember who's who.

Ursula: 'My persona looks like a meth-addicted Julie Andrews in her mid-40s, and talks like Edie Falco in the Sopranos. The butterfly tattoo on her shoulder is fuzzy with age.'

A Few Basics

There are a few core things that all the personae can remember. Most importantly, they can remember how to speak their native language – it is recommended that they all speak the same language. At the Dealer's discretion they can remember how to read and write that language too. They remember basic skills like how to eat food and what a key is and how

clothes and money work, unless you specifically want to play a game in which they need to relearn everything from scratch.

They do not remember anything about the other personae, or even recognise them. That may come later.

There's more about abilities, and the ones that personae are assumed to have at the start on page 13, but ultimately it's down to the Dealer and the boundaries of the particular Fugue game you're playing.

One More Thing

Is there anything you forget about yourself from time to time? I have several. I forget my hair is grey, and I forget my nose is a different shape now, and my two gold teeth. So let's assume there's something your persona forgot to mention about themselves too – something that would be noticed by the person standing next to them.

So when the player has finished describing their persona, the player on their left gets to add one more physical thing about them. Anything goes within reason. There are some guidelines:

1. You can't contradict anything that the persona's player has already described.
2. It can be bad, good or neutral, but it can't be disabling. You can't declare that a persona is missing a leg or an eye, or is deaf or or very old or obese or has a limp.
3. The player can veto your first suggestion. However, if they do this you get a second suggestion – which must be substantially different to the first; if they reject a forehead tattoo reading 'Backstreet Boy' you can't follow it up by suggesting a neck tattoo reading 'New Kid On The Block', or any other tattoo or any possibly sexual references to boy-bands. They have to accept your second suggestion.
4. Don't be mean. There's no immediate comeback for being mean, but you're liable to make an enemy if you're mean, and you don't want any more enemies in a Fugue game.

Troy: 'Scott's persona has a burn-mark on his back. It looks like a brand, like white-hot metal was pressed hard against his skin, about a foot long. It's in the shape of a crescent moon.'

Signifier

The one other thing that every persona gets at the start of a Fugue game is a Signifier. The Dealer deals cards from the tarot deck face-up to each player until they all have one card from the major arcana in front of them. This is their persona's Signifier. Write it on their sheet.

This card doesn't represent the persona, their personality, their history or any part of it – not necessarily. But when cards are used as part of the gameplay, if a persona's Signifier appears in the course of an action then that persona will have a flashback and an ability (see page XX).

Defining the Persona

Instead of creating characters with fully defined personalities and abilities at the start of the game, like most RPGs, in Fugue the process of defining a persona is part of the main gameplay. As the story progresses the personae will begin to remember bits of their past life, and these memories – ‘flashbacks’ – will also each define one ability for that persona.

An Introduction to Flashbacks

A flashback is a recovered memory, something that a persona remembers at a key moment. It’s an instant or a few seconds of their previous life, which may sometimes include other characters in the game, and may sometimes tie into other flashbacks and memories they’ve had before.

Depending on the type, flashbacks can be described from the persona’s player, from another player, or from the Dealer. They all have the same effect: the persona recalls (and the player or Dealer describes) a scene with information about who they were or at least the sort of things they used to do, and they remember how to do one thing in particular – in game terms they get an Ability.

An Introduction to Abilities

In the Fugue system every persona can do everything as well as an average person in the content-set’s genre – in *Alas Vegas* that means a first-world modern-day human being. They can walk for a couple of hours at three miles per hour, read and write English, do simple maths, perform basic hygiene, brawl, and fire a gun in the rough direction of a target. To do anything more than that, or with any degree of expertise, requires an ability, meaning they have expertise in that area.

Because the personae start with amnesia, they will need to recall abilities that most people take for granted, like swimming, driving a car, cooking a meal, or using a weapon with any aptitude. But each player can only give their persona two abilities per session – with a flashback for each one – and sometimes you’ll really need a safe-cracker or getaway driver. And that’s why you’ll want to give abilities (and flashbacks) to other personae.

Abilities are used to perform actions within the game. Playing actions uses a card mechanic that can trigger more flashbacks (and let personae learn more actions). It’s described in more detail on page 13.

Flashbacks

Creating a flashback is as simple as describing an incident or fragment that the persona has remembered. The memory must be triggered by something or someone in the current scene. The dominant action the persona is performing in the flashback becomes an ability that they can now use. Write it on their sheet.

Scott's persona has found a cleaver. Scott declares that it triggers a flashback.

Scott: 'I remember a white-tiled room with a marble counter. I was using a heavy cleaver like this one to chop up a large joint of meat, hacking right through the bone. Maybe I used to be a butcher. Anyway, I know how to handle a cleaver.'

The Dealer: 'Whether you were a butcher or something else is your choice but okay, you can use this as a weapon now. Meanwhile the growling is getting closer.'

(Scott writes 'Use cleaver as weapon – hacking at meat in white-tiled room – maybe butcher?' on his persona's sheet.)

If it seems awfully convenient that just as a persona finds a useful item they remember they've used one like it before, remember that the incident or object is what has triggered the flashback. Also bear in mind that Fugue games are often set in worlds where the nature of reality is sometimes questionable, and themes and key moments from one's previous life will reappear in the present with good reasons. In other words, be careful what you wish for.

Gaining Abilities and Having Flashbacks

There are four ways of gaining new abilities (and having flashbacks, since the two always go together):

1. Twice per game-session, each player can create a flashback and an ability to go with it for their persona.
2. Once per game-session, each player can describe one flashback (and give an ability) to one other player's persona. The flashback must be about the latter persona but must include the former player's persona as well. The two players may not discuss in advance what the flashback is going to be, though they can discuss the ability. The Dealer gets a veto over the ability, but not over the flashback.
3. If a persona's Signifier card comes up in play, the Dealer gives them a flashback, a relevant ability, and the chance to immediately use it in the action.
4. Rarely, a persona may encounter a game-character or a game-event that will remind them of something from their earlier life, and they get a flashback and an ability from it. This is usually a part of the story that's baked into the game, and both the flashback and the related ability will be dictated by the Dealer.

You've seen the first type of flashback in the example above. Here's an example of the second type of flashback, where one player gives another player's persona a memory and an ability:

By this point the players' personae have names. Troy's persona is Trey, Simon's is Shimon, and Scott's is Scotty.

Troy: 'Booze! I reach over the bar, grabbing for a bottle of Jim Beam. Maybe I was a bartender. I can make everyone cocktails.'

Simon: 'Staring at the bottle, Trey has a sudden flashback. He's outside, crouched on open ground, somewhere woody. It's dark, raining, freezing cold. My persona Shimon is slumped on the ground, unconscious. Trey's drenched to the skin, clutching an empty Jim Beam bottle, sobbing and screaming. He's been there all night. He's taken off his shirt and is using it to bandage a huge cut on his forearm – it's where he got that scar. The rain has blotched the blood.'

Troy: 'Oh great. What ability do I get to take away from that?'

Simon: 'Field-dressing a wound.'

The Dealer: 'I'll allow that.'

This is also an example of Simon being a dick. It's much more useful to give someone an ability and flashback combo in a stressful situation where they need it, or when they've found an item they need to be able to use or a problem they have to solve. Maybe Simon feels the group needs a medic. Maybe he just doesn't like Troy's choice of cocktails.

Here's an example of the third type of flashback, where the Dealer gives a persona a flashback from a Signifier card:

Scotty and Trey are in a knife-fight with a couple of locals and are not doing well, mostly because they have no relevant abilities. In the middle of the contest the Dealer deals a face-up card to Troy, and it is Scotty's Signifier – the Empress.

The Dealer: 'Scotty, you remember another fight. It's evening, you're in the back yard of a house, there's empty beer cans around and the smell of barbecue smoke. You're stripped to the waist, circling the other guy. You've got a carving knife, he's got a wicked-looking flick-knife. A woman is leaning against the fence, watching. Same woman as the last flashback, and just as attractive. You both keep glancing at her. Is this fight about her? You don't remember. She's excited but she doesn't seem to care who wins.'

Scott: 'So I get knife-fighting as an ability?'

The Dealer: 'Yes.'

Troy: 'Who was Scotty fighting?'

The Dealer: 'You.'

Troy: 'Do I get knife-fighting too?'

Dealer: 'It wasn't your memory, was it?'

The persona can immediately use this new ability in the action, even if they weren't originally taking part. The player describes what happens.

The flashback can be based around the imagery on the Signifier card, like this one, or not. If a persona's every flashback is tied to their Signifier it may get dull fast, but on the other hand tarot cards are rich with

complex images that can be interpreted in multiple ways and make useful triggers for narrative ideas. Your call.

You probably spotted that the Dealer included a second persona in the flashback. Similar to when one player gives another's persona a flashback, only the persona whose Signifier has been revealed receives the memory and the accompanying ability; but the persona on whom the card was played should appear in the flashback². That can include game-characters. Like this:

In a casino Scotty is attempting to pickpocket some chips from an unsuspecting gambler. The Dealer decrees a difficulty of 8 and flips a card. It is Shimon's Signifier, the Sun.

Dealer: 'Scotty, you blew it. He turns to accost you. Shimon, from where you're standing you can see this happening, and you remember something. Specifically you remember this guy's face, bruised and bloody. You were in some kind of basement or garage. Scotty was there too, smoking a cigarette and watching you.'

Simon: 'Interesting. I walk over to intervene and tap this guy on the shoulder.'

Dealer: 'He jerks his head back to look at you, his eyes open wide with sudden terror. He screams a single swear-word and flees out of the casino.'

Simon: 'That is also interesting. Do I get an ability, or any more of the flashback?'

Dealer: 'Yeah, you remember a bit more. It's not nice. Take the ability "persuade people with your fists".' Do you want to do anything with it?'

Simon: 'Nah, I'll let him run.'

Scott: 'Can I finish fishing his wallet before he goes?'

Dealer: 'Sure.'

Scott: 'That's more money in my pocket.'

If a player turns over their own Signifier then they describe the flashback and ability; if it's turned over by another player, then that player has to do it. As before it's only the persona whose Signifier it is who receives the memory and the ability, but this time the player describing the flashback should include their own persona as well. Like this:

² Some people have suggested that this is backwards, that it should be the persona whose player turned up the Signifier who gets the flashback, and it should include the persona that the Signifier relates to. If you want to play it that way then you're welcome to, but there are four good reasons why it's the way it is: (1) for consistency, so that the rule across the board is that seeing your Signifier means you get a flashback; (2) for game-balance, to avoid the chance that one persona turns up all the Signifiers and gets all the flashbacks; (3) getting a new ability right as you're in the middle of doing something is a little too *deus-ex-machina* for good storytelling; and (4) to imply that there is some greater bond than coincidence connecting the personae.

Trey and Shimon are brawling over a high-value casino chip. Trey is attempting to grab a nearby crowbar to bludgeon Shimon. From his hand of cards he turns over the Empress, Scotty's signifier.

Dealer: 'Scotty, you get a flashback. Troy, you get to describe it.'

Troy: 'Fucking crowbars. I remember the cheap ones we used to steal from O'Brien's store, and how they'd break if you hit them wrong. Scotty and me broke two of them getting through the gates of that chemical company, the night I got these burns. We were -'

Simon: 'Are you writing a book? We've got a fight to finish.'

Troy: 'Scotty gets "Breaking and entering" as an ability, and some unfinished business with Shimon.'

There's another connected thing that can happen, though it's rare: two Signifiers can come up in the same hand. In that case, both personae receive the same memory, which includes both of them (and, if the cards were played on or by a different persona or game-character, including them as well), and they both get the same ability as a result. It's so unlikely that I'm not going to give it an example of play. You're smart. Work it out yourself.

And finally here's the fourth kind of flashback, where a game-character triggers the recovery of a memory:

The Dealer: 'Trey, the guy bugs his eyes at you. "Man, don't you recognise me? It's Greg - your brother in law? Though I - are we still... does that still count after what happened to Mary?" And your mind is filled with the picture: twilight, the broken body, blood on the car's bumper; and the silence apart from the ticking of cooling metal. Just her; and you holding her. Just you.'"

Troy: 'You're saying I...?'

Dealer: 'I'm just telling you what Trey remembers.'

Troy: 'But at least I get an ability as well, right?'

Dealer: 'Yeah, you get "concealing a corpse".'

Wherever they come from, all flashbacks must be triggered by something around the personae: something they notice or experience, or something that someone says, or a need they realise they have. Flashbacks can't come from nowhere.

Dealer and players must always describe the flashback first, then the new ability.

When a persona has a flashback, the player should write it and the ability it's related to on their sheet. Whether they add a note on how they got it, who else was involved or which bastard gave it to them is their choice.

Flashbacks that your persona receives from other players or from the Dealer should represent the type of memory that you hoped would stay buried, that you don't want to recall. And it goes without saying that

though all the other players get to hear your persona's flashbacks, their personae in the game are completely unaware of these recollections, unless you specifically say that you're telling them what you've remembered.

Any character controlled by the Dealer, meaning all game-characters including their own persona, cannot have flashbacks or gain new abilities. The Dealer can include them in any flashbacks caused by a Signifier, but they can't get any new abilities or have any flashbacks of their own.

What Flashbacks Aren't

Just as in character creation, the personae are basically regular human beings. This means a lot of flashbacks are off-limits. They can't remember having super-powers or supernatural abilities. They can't remember having specialist knowledge that would give them information that's only available to the Dealer.

And they can't spontaneously recognise game-characters as friends, relatives or acquaintances from their former lives. There are a couple of situations in a specific background like *Alas Vegas* where they will recognise someone, but these are specific instances.

Augmenting a Flashback

Once a flashback has happened, the Dealer and other players can use later flashbacks to add more detail and information onto it, building in new perspectives and angles to the original happening. They cannot change the details of what's already been established, but they can change the tone or circumstances.

Troy: 'Okay, Trey needs to have a Stealth ability.... I have a flashback to sneaking around the corridors under the old hospital, trying to find the source of a regular thudding noise. I peer round a door into what must have been the morgue: tiled walls, white marble slabs. Scotty is in there, hacking bits off something on a slab with a cleaver. There's a big pentacle painted in blood on the wall behind him. He rolls the thing on the slab over, and I see what it is.'

Dealer: 'What is it?'

Troy: 'It's Shimon. What's left of him.'

Simon: 'What, you can't just -'

Troy: 'Did I fucking stutter?'

Abilities

Abilities exist at one level: either your persona can do a thing, or they can't. If they can do it then the cards may allow them to occasionally do it super-well, but there's not many shades of grey here.

Having an ability doesn't mean a persona is unique or unbeatable in that field. If you want to have a flashback to winning the Nobel Prize for

Biology or being elected President of the USA, that's fine. They get a regular ability for it, same as anyone else's.

Actions

Actions are how personae do things in the game-world. There are three main types of action in the Fugue system: basic actions, skilled actions and contested actions.

Basic Action

If a persona wants to do something that any normal human being could do, they can. These abilities are ones that are unlikely to be affected by amnesia, and include:

- Speak their native language
- Read and write their native language (at the Dealer's discretion)
- Fire a gun in the rough direction of a target
- Eat food, but not how to cook or how to eat with good manners
- Gamble (this is a special case for *Alas Vegas*)
- Anything else the Dealer decides is reasonable for this Fugue set

Things they probably can't do:

- Remember specialist or learned knowledge (e.g. engineering)
- Drive a car
- Repair machinery
- Fire a gun accurately, or reload a gun
- Martial arts
- Operate a computer

Skilled Action

When a persona tries to do something that would test the abilities of a normal person but without anyone or anything actively trying to stop them, this is a Skilled Action. It may go one of three ways:

No Ability

If the persona has no relevant ability, then the Dealer assigns the task a difficulty number between 2 and 12 (2 being the easiest, 12 being the hardest) and flips over the top card of the tarot deck. If the card is from the minor arcana and its number is equal to or higher than the difficulty number then the action succeeds. If the number is lower, then the action fails. If the card is from the major arcana then the action is an immediate fail, and cannot be retried.

Relevant Ability

If the persona has an ability that's relevant to the task then their chance of success is much higher. The Dealer assigns the action a difficulty num-

ber between 2 and 12, as above, and flips the top card. If the card is from the minor arcana and its number is equal to or higher than the difficulty number then the action succeeds. If the number is lower, then the action fails. If the card is from the major arcana then the action is an immediate success.

Simpler this way

Alternatively if a persona wants to try an action for which they have a relevant ability, the Dealer can simply declare that they succeed. It's much easier and faster like that.

Time Passes

This is an optional rule, to determine how long it takes to perform a task. Don't feel you have to use it all the time: it's best kept for difficult or plot-crucial tasks, or one where there's a time-pressure.

If the persona does not have any abilities that are relevant to the task, then the Dealer assigns the task a difficulty number between 3 and 12, specifies hours, minutes or seconds, and flips the top card from the tarot deck. Any card from the major arcana is an automatic and immediate fail. Any card from the minor arcana indicates how long has been spent trying to do the action; and if it does not beat the difficulty number then the action has failed.

If the persona has an ability that is relevant to the task, then they will probably succeed. The only question is how long it takes them. The Dealer specifies hours, minutes or seconds, and flips a card. If it's minor arcana, the number on the card is how long it has taken so far in the specified units, and if the card beats the difficulty number then the job is done. If it's a major arcana then the persona succeeds immediately.

Simon: 'You said it's an old safe? Shimon is going to press his ear to the door; see if he can hear the tumblers falling as he turns the wheel, to work out the combination. And he's an expert with locks.'
The Dealer: 'Of course you can try. It'll probably take a few minutes.' (The Dealer flips a card. It is the Four of Wands) *'Four minutes pass.'* (Flips another card: the Hierophant, a major arcana).
'Okay, you've cracked it. Do you want to open the door?'

Adding Narrative

In all cases, whether the outcome succeeds or fails, the player must describe part of what happens as a result of their attempt, using part or all of the symbolic illustration on the card as a prompt or inspiration. It doesn't matter if they're not familiar with tarot cards – in fact it can be an advantage.

Simon: 'Shimon is going to try to hotwire the Caddy's ignition. It's an old model, the electric should be fairly simple.'

The Dealer: 'That's a difficulty of 8, and as you've never done this before it's going to take minutes.' (The Dealer flips a card. It is a major arcana, the Tower, which depicts an explosion.)

Simon: 'Okay. I yank the ignition out. A spark arcs across two wires. There's a faint foomp sound as something behind the dashboard catches on fire. Guys, we need to try another car – fast.'

Contested Actions and Combat

A contested action is one where two or more characters are actively working against each other. The obvious example is a fight. A less obvious example is a game of poker.

The game-mechanic used to resolve contested actions is a version of the casino game Blackjack, also known as Vingt-et-un. In the Fugue system the game is played with the tarot deck.

One key point: every played card goes on a discard pile. When there are no cards left in the main deck, the discard pile is shuffled and becomes the main deck. All cards go back into the deck at the end of each session.

Blackjack for Beginners

If you don't know Blackjack, it's a gambling game that's normally played with a regular deck of cards. All the players compete against a single dealer (with a small 'd'). Everyone including the dealer are trying to get a hand of cards that adds up to 21 but no higher. Hands start off with two cards, and the player can ask the dealer for more, one at a time ('twist') if they want.

Players can freeze their hand ('stick') at any point, which ends their turn. If their hand totals more than 21 they are bust and their stake is forfeit to the dealer. Face cards all count as 10; aces count as 1 or 11. Making 21 with two cards is known as 'blackjack' and usually wins the hand. When everyone has either stuck or gone bust, the dealer takes their turn. In the case of drawn hands, the house wins.

There are a few special cases and variants (a hand with five cards totaling under or exactly 21; splitting a pair of matching cards into two hands; doubling down; insurance; the incredibly rare 'triple 7s' and more) but the basic game is pretty simple. If you don't know the rules then check the internet. Wikipedia has a good description of the game.

Blackjack for Fugue

There are a number of major differences between regular blackjack and the Fugue version. The first one has already been mentioned: it's a tarot deck instead of a regular deck, and using tarot cards throws the normal odds for the game way out.

Second, there are no table stakes. You're playing to win or lose. If you lose by going bust, you're stymied – you're done for this round.

Third, as the hand is played each player's cards are revealed one by one (see below), and after the starting two-card deal they are dealt one at a time. In other words on your turn you can only request one card ('hit') or nothing ('stand'), then the Dealer moves onto the next player. Dealer plays last, then play goes back to the first player. None of the game's usual special rules apply: no splits, no doubling-down, no special reward for five-and-under, nothing like that.

Fourth, if any participant in the contest has a relevant ability, they get a Wild Card – a single card dealt to them face-down. They may look at it before using it. At any point in the contest they can turn the card face-up and swap it for any other face-up card in their hand. They only get one wild card per contest, but they can keep it and reuse it in subsequent rounds of this contest, if it lasts more than one.

Fifth, the Dealer gets a hand for each game-character involved in the contest. (If no game-characters are involved, if it's a persona-vs-persona contest, then the Dealer deals but does not play a hand). If the Dealer is involved, then players must beat the Dealer's relevant hand to win. If there is a draw, the Dealer wins by default.

The last major difference is that every card played face-up forms a part of the narrative of the contest. As above, the people controlling the participants in the contest must use elements from the name or illustration on the card to describe part of the action.

If You Don't Know Blackjack

If you don't know Blackjack, don't learn it and then try to understand the modified version described above. Just read this.

The aim of the game is to get cards totalling 21 or as close to it as possible, without going over 21. If your cards total 22 or more then you are bust or, in the terms of Fugue, stymied.

To begin, the Dealer defines the limits of the contested action, breaking it down into groups of participants. So imagine you're in a bar-fight. All the personae are involved, but they're not all fighting the same people. Scotty is wrestling over a gun with a heavy, while Trey and Shimon are tussling with a bouncer. The Dealer splits this into two different conflicts: Scotty vs Heavy; and Trey & Shimon vs Bouncer. Scotty fights one hand of cards against the Heavy; then Trey and Shimon fight a hand simultaneously against the Bouncer; then if Scotty's contest wasn't resolved he fights another hand against the Heavy; and so on.

However, what's happening in one part of the conflict can affect the other – it's a narrative game after all. If the Bouncer is stymied, Trey can slam him to the ground while Shimon throws a chair across the room at the Heavy that Scotty is fighting. What was the Heavy's total on the cards? If Shimon has beaten it, the Heavy takes damage (see below).

As above, the cards played are interpreted by the person who played them and elements of their illustrations are used to describe what's happening in the game-world.

The Play

The Dealer deals two cards face-down to every participant in the contested action – that is, every persona and game-character. The Dealer plays the hands for all game-characters. Play proceeds clockwise starting with the player on the Dealer’s left.

You need to understand that in Fugue games contested actions and combat are not just things you resolve with rules and numbers, they’re part of the unfolding story. They are part of the narrative, and are driven by the images, icons and symbols on the tarot cards that are played. It’s easier to demonstrate this than to explain it – see the example of play on page XX. You might want to read that first, then come back and read this.

On your turn you have to play a card. You have three ways to do this:

1. You can turn one of your face-down cards face-up and describe your action;
2. You can twist, meaning that you ask the Dealer for a face-up card. This is automatically the card you play; or
3. You can use a wild card. Declare your persona is using an appropriate ability. For this the Dealer gives you a wild card – a face-down card (one per relevant ability per contested action). You may look at this card, and you can swap it on your turn for a face-up card in your hand – you remove the face-up card and discard it, then put the wild card in its place and describe what happens as a result.

You are trying to get face-up cards with a value of 21 or as close to it as possible, without going to 22 or beyond. You must have at least two face-up cards to make a valid hand.

Fail!

If a persona goes bust – their hand adds up to more than 21 – then they are stymied. They can take no further active part in the action of this round, and cannot win it. If all participants involved in the action are stymied then the cards are collected and another round of cards is dealt. This doesn’t happen often, but it does happen.

Ending the Hand

The hand comes to an end when one player has 21 and nobody can match them (see 21! below), or when nobody wants to reveal any more cards, in which case the highest hand wins (see But What Happened? below).

21!

If a character has face-up cards in front of them totalling 21, then the normal play stops. Every other character with a hand in the round can turn over any or all of their face-down cards to try to make 21 as well, or a better version of 21 (see page XX). If nobody can, then the character with the best hand succeeds at what they were trying to do in the action; which means their player (or the Dealer if it’s a game-character) get to describe what happens.

But What Happened?

The winning participant, the one with the highest hand (which can be any of the game-characters controlled by the Dealer) gets one free description of what happens. In the case of combat, this involves neutralising or escaping from any combatants who were directly engaging your persona. It doesn't necessarily mean winning the entire combat. The amount of damage they can do depends on how good their hand was. The fewer cards in the hand, the more powerful it is.

Here are all the possible hands in increasing order of effectiveness, each with its effects. The effects given here are specifically about combat; if you're playing poker against an opponent you probably won't want to rip their head off at the end of the round. So if it's a non-violent confrontation, use your imagination.

- **Bust (face-up cards total more than 21)** – you're stymied (see above).
- **Highest hand** – you can do a non-permanent wound to someone, or incapacitate them for the next round, or attempt to terminate the Contested Action. This, along with the one below, are the two most common outcomes of a round.
- **21 with 3 or more cards** – your persona can do a permanent or non-permanent wound, or knock your adversary out.
- **21 with 2 cards** – as above, but your persona can optionally kill their opponent if using a weapon to do it.
- **21 with 2 cards, one of them Major Arcana** – your persona can kill, do a permanent or non-permanent wound, knock your adversary out or incapacitate them with your bare hands or any weapon.
- **21 with 2 cards, both Major Arcana** – your persona can kill, wound or incapacitate every character who was opposing them in the contested action. If this is only one character, defeat them spectacularly.
- **21 with the Fool (value 0) and the World (value 21)** – the persona can perform a single action without having to justify how. Punch through a wall? Pick up and throw a car? Pull the sun out of the sky and force it down your adversary's throat? Yes. However you have to start describing the action before the Dealer turns over another card, or the moment has gone.

Two important notes here. Firstly, if you win the hand, you can *always* attempt to end the contested action.

Secondly, if your opponent is incapacitated or knocked out during a round, then as long as they're still in that state another persona or game-character can kill them with a single action.

Draw!

If the hand ends with two or more adversaries having the same high total on their cards, it is a stalemate. The conflict continues into another round. All participants who haven't been eliminated through death/disablement/

unconsciousness/running away discard and get a fresh two cards from the Dealer. Players who had a wild card in the last round can keep it.

Ending the Contest

The contest continues until there is a reason for it to stop or end, which usually means that some or all of the participants are disabled, dead or otherwise unable to carry on, or have fled, or have surrendered or given up. Those last three aren't uncommon. People have a healthy sense of self-preservation and will only rarely put the value of another's life above their own.

Listen

I realise this sounds complicated now. But in a little while there's going to be a huge example of play and it'll all become clear. On the other hand, if you don't know how Blackjack works and you haven't bothered to go and read over those rules then do that now, because otherwise you're just going to get more and more confused, and then you'll post a stinking review of the game on RPG.net that it doesn't deserve, and then your karma will suck for months, and hey, I'm only trying to look out for your interests. Trust me. I'm on your side.

Card Values in Contested Actions

- Minor arcana (suit cards) are worth their face value, so the Two of Cups is a 2, the Nine of Swords is a 9, and so on.
- Aces count as 1 or 11.
- Face cards of the minor arcana (Page, Knight, Queen, King) all count as 10.
- Major arcana count as 10 or the number on them. So the Magician card (number 1) can be played as 1 or 10; and Temperance (number 14) can be played as 10 or 14.

Exceptions

- The Wheel of Fortune (number 10) has to be played as 10.
- The Fool (number 0 or 22) can be played as 0 or 10. If it is played as 0, it adds no points to the hand but can have narrative results – plus it may be a persona's Signifier, which will cause other effects.
- The World (number 21) has to be played as 10 – it may be worth 21 but cannot be played on its own, it has to be played as part of a hand of at least two cards. However:
- The World and the Fool can be played together, to total 21. This is the most powerful hand in the game (see page XX).

Example of a contested action

The personae have emerged from an abandoned casino building, the Towers, to see a set of three heavies leaning against their car. There's a good chance the heavies are looking for Benito, a former pit-boss at the

Swords. The personae know exactly where Benito is: he's in the building they just left with part of his head missing. By this stage all the players are speaking as their personae.

Scott: 'They're not here for a friendly chat, are they?'

Troy: 'They're locals. This is going to get bad fast.'

Chuck: 'This is already bad.'

Scott: 'Let me handle it. I stare at the three hoods and remember a time I faced down a crew from the local mob-family who'd been sent to teach me a lesson.'

The Dealer: 'Tell me more.'

Scott: 'They busted into my bar and started throwing furniture around. They were mad because I'd refused to buy my liquor from their boss. I offered them a drink, mixed some cocktails, showed them why the brands I was using tasted better than theirs. Sheer bravado and barman's charm. Course, a week later they burned the place down...'

The Dealer: 'Let's call that Calm Thugs. What are you going to do with it?'

Scott: 'Trey, you take the grenade. Move to a position where you can take cover quickly, and if they bring out guns you throw it.'

Simon: 'I'll come with you, Scotty. I know kung-fu.'

Scott: 'We walk over to the car.'

The Dealer: 'As you approach the three heavies stand up. They're waiting for you to close the gap.'

Scott: "'Gentlemen! Thanks for protecting our car from the sun. How can we help you?'"

The Dealer: 'The smallest of the three – which isn't saying much – steps forward. "Where's Benito?"'

Scott: 'I'll try to bluff it. "Benito who?"'

The Dealer: "'Benito you were tooling around with in your car this morning Benito, that's who.' You want to talk this negotiation out or do it as a contested action?'

Scott: 'Let's go to the cards. I'm in. Shimon?'

Simon: 'I'm holding back for this round.'

(The Dealer deals two cards to Scott and two cards to herself. They each look at their cards.)

Scott: 'I'm using Calm Thug straight away, so I need a wild card. Let's see if we can't talk this out.' (He gets another face-down card, looks at it and puts it back face-down.)

Scott: 'Okay.' (He places the Three of Coins face-up from his hand, showing people talking.) "'Sure, we gave Benito a lift, but we're small money. Why would someone like Benito be hanging with us?'"

The Dealer: (Plays the Moon, a major arcana card with a value of 18, showing dogs barking at the moon.) "'You hear anything,

Tony? I just hear dogs yapping. Tell us where he is or we beat it out of you.”

Scott: (Plays the Seven of Swords face-up in front of him) “We dropped him off outside the Swords casino, he said he had to see a man.”

The Dealer: (Plays the Two of Swords, showing a blindfolded figure) “We’re from the Swords, dipshit.’ He puts out a massive hand and grips you across the face, covering your eyes.’

Scott: ‘He has twenty points in front of him, right?’

The Dealer: ‘Yes. And you have ten.’

Scott: ‘I’m pretty sure he won’t be drawing any more cards. I twist.’

The Dealer: (Deals Scott one card face-up. It is the Eight of Cups, showing someone embarking on a journey.) Eighteen.

Scott: ‘Okay. I feint, making it look like I’m about to break his grip and make a run for it. And then –’

(He reveals his wild card: it is the major arcana Wheel of Fortune, number 10. He places it over the 7 in his hand)

Scott: ‘– I punch him so hard in the face that he cartwheels backwards over the car and lies still.’

Simon: ‘Calmed that thug right the fuck down.’

The Dealer: ‘That’s the hand. Blackjack with a major arcana, that’s powerful enough to kill him if you want.’

Scott: ‘Naw, but he’ll be unconscious for the rest of the combat and probably beyond.’

Troy: ‘Wait, wait. The Wheel, that’s my Signifier.’

The Dealer: ‘So it is. Scott?’

Scott: ‘Troy, you’ve seen Scotty do this before – exactly this move, face-punching someone into a backflip across a car. It was beside a road somewhere, open farmland, bright sun. The guy he punched was a cop. Cop didn’t get up either.’

Troy: ‘And I get an ability too?’

Scott: ‘How about “Keep cool in the face of extreme violence”?’

Troy: ‘I have a feeling that may be useful soon.’

The Dealer: ‘You get to intercede too, if you want.’

Troy: ‘I’ll pass. Let’s just get on with things.’

The Dealer: ‘Both the other heavies are throwing themselves at Scotty. Who’s in for the next round?’

(It continues.)

Wounds and Healing

A non-permanent wound is something that the persona can recover from with only cosmetic scarring. A non-life-threatening stab, for example, or a sprain or broken bone. A player with a non-permanent wound may not use any abilities associated with that part of the body until the wound is

tended (see below).

A permanent wound is typically an amputation, disablement or the loss of a part of the body, such as an eye or ear. For ease of administration, a cut or stabbing wound that is serious enough to cause someone to bleed to death if untended is considered a permanent wound. A player with a permanent wound may not use any abilities until the wound is tended, and permanently loses the use of all abilities associated with that part of the body. For example, a right-handed persona who loses their right arm would also lose their Paint Beautiful Roses ability unless they specifically worked to relearn it using their other hand, which could take months.

Incapacitation is an inability to continue. An incapacitated character might be unconscious, subdued or restrained. However, the character is not necessarily wounded.

Death is death.

To heal, a wound must be tended – that is, stitched, bandaged or given other appropriate treatment. Untended wounds do not heal. Healing rates depend on the setting of the Fugue game you’re playing. For example, in *Alas Vegas* a tended wound will heal completely if the character gets at least eight hours of continuous sleep. Weird, I know. Must be something in the desert.

Not Killing People

Here’s a thing. Narrative games like this often rely on a threat of death to prevent personae from doing stupid stuff. Without that threat of death there’s no sense of jeopardy or risk. On the other hand if a persona dies then they’re out of the game, and because of the way a Fugue narrative is structured, with recovered memories and developing networks of shared past experiences, it’s really difficult to bring in new personae half-way through the story.

You’ve got a tricky job as Dealer: you have to make the players understand on a gut level that this is a vicious, brutal place filled with people who can and will kill them for basically no reason beyond whim, instinct or a vaguely perceived insult... and at the same time you’ve got to keep them alive as much as you can.

In practice, Fugue deals with this through a five-step process:

1. Let the players know that their personae are in danger of death.
2. Don’t actually kill personae except in exceptional circumstances.
3. If they deserve it, do anything physical to personae except actually killing them. Beat them. Break a few bones. Gouge out an eye, cut off an ear, split a nostril, lop off a few fingers, maybe even lose a limb. Or two. Cut their tongue out. Take regular opportunities to remind them how much their injuries hurt, and how they need more painkillers, and how the blood is seeping through the bandages again, or how they shouldn’t have done that because they’ve just torn their stitches out, and their broken ribs are jabbing into their lung and they’re coughing up blood with every breath.

4. Let me make this clear: when they fail, ***fuck them up***. Make every hit feel more visceral, more real than crossing off a few hit points ever could. These characters are temporary, their active existence ends at the conclusion of the last Fugue session. They've got four game-sessions to survive, and as long as they get to the end of the last one conscious then you're good.
5. But – and this is crucial – whatever you do to the personae, don't piss off your players. Don't demoralise them, don't make them feel worthless or powerless. If a player's persona is having a bad time then often the player won't be having fun either, and while they'll stay to the end of the game session, they'll be less inclined to turn up to the next one. So be careful.

Experience

The Fugue system doesn't deal with experience points or levelling up. The personae will gain skills throughout the adventure, and when it's over it's over.

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