



NEGOTIATIONS IN FATE

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One of my favorite parts of roleplaying is that I get to play characters who can do things I never could: master archers and badass street fighters, werewolves with magic rituals and cyborgs that can hack any computer on the planet. It never matters that I can't shoot a bow, throw a punch, mess with magic, or operate any computer program more complicated than a word processor; my character is the one doing all that stuff, not me.

But there are situations in roleplaying in which player skill and character skill overlap, especially around social skills. If I roleplay out convincing a villain to change his ways, do I need to roll with Rapport or just talk in character? Does it matter that I have a high Rapport if all that's required is for me to roleplay what my character says?

When Brendan Conway and I worked on the new Fate Core update for *Bulldogs!* by Galileo Games, we ran into this problem around haggling over prices. We wanted our players to have fun roleplaying out the back and forth of negotiations, but we also wanted the Haggling skill to matter.

In this article, I explain the new system we developed for **negotiations** in Fate Core, a special system for haggling over costs. Like other lenses for action in Fate—challenges, contests, and conflicts—negotiations work between two PCs or between a PC and an NPC, with any number of assisting characters on either side, helping to structure a series of rolls that encourage players to think strategically about the negotiation while roleplaying out their positions.

Negotiations: The Basics

Like challenges, contests, and conflicts, a negotiation sets up a procedure for handling rolls. Note that a negotiation isn't a challenge, contest, or conflict; those lenses for action are already described in *FATE CORE SYSTEM* (pages 146-175) and cover situations where characters are solving problems, competing for resources, and trying to harm each other.

Negotiation, on the other hand, is about trying to come to a deal. It's not just about convincing the other side that they should buy your products; it's also about pressuring them to take a price you like without revealing how much you want the deal to get done in the first place. Negotiations focus on strengths and weaknesses of a position, in addition to the actual act of convincing, threatening, or tricking someone into taking the deal.

Brendan is GMing a game for Marissa, Isaac, and Justin in which they play FBI agents investigating strange and supernatural cases all over the country. In their second session, they get mixed up in a hostage situation: Isaac's character is taken hostage at a bank they're investigating, leaving Justin and Marissa's characters outside the bank, trying to talk to the bank robbers inside. The group agrees that this will be a negotiation!

Here's how it works:

- Set the stakes for the negotiation
- Select lead negotiators
- Create advantages
- Make a final roll

PHASE 1: SET THE STAKES FOR THE NEGOTIATION

The first step of any negotiation is to agree on the stakes. In *Bulldogs!*, most purchases have a standard cost, but most systems (and situations) don't have such an easy blueprint for outcomes. Before any dice hit the table, both sides have to agree on what will happen if either side succeeds or succeeds with style.

To start, both sides should declare a minimum outcome, whatever it is they think would happen if they "won" the negotiation—remember that this is a negotiation, not a social conflict, so winning can't be something the other side would never tolerate. After those bare minimum successes are detailed, each side should also put forward their version of a

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full victory, what it looks like if the other side mostly concedes in taking the deal.

The players are most interested in getting Isaac and the other hostages out alive, but they'd also like to get the robbers to surrender if the negotiations go well. Brendan thinks the bank robbers are probably most interested in getting away, but they'd also like to take a few hostages with them to ensure their safety.

The players immediately object to the robbers leaving with multiple hostages. There's no way they would let them leave the scene with more than one hostage! Brendan nods, and asks if one hostage would be acceptable. The players agree to that, but only if it's not one of them.

Together, they list out the outcomes:

PC Success: The robbers release Isaac's character, but the robbers still have hostages.

PC Success with Style: The robbers release all the hostages and surrender.

Robber Success: The PCs provide the robbers with a getaway vehicle and ensure their safe passage.

Robber Success with Style: The robbers get to take one NPC hostage with them.

Marissa, Justin, and Isaac agree to those terms—they could live with the robbers getting away with one hostage, and getting Isaac out means that they can put together a plan to free the rest of the hostages!

Ties in Negotiations

Ties in negotiations can mean two things:

- A twist—as would happen in a contest
- The deal falls apart, and the PCs have to find a new way forward

In the event of a tie, the GM chooses which one is more appropriate for the situation at hand.

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PHASE 2: SELECT LEAD NEGOTIATORS

Once the stakes are set, both sides select a lead negotiator. Since the lead negotiator will make the final negotiations roll, it's ideal for both sides to select someone with a high Rapport (or whatever skill makes sense in your setting). At the same time, both sides also want a lead negotiator who has a high resistance skill as well, since they'll also have to defend against any advantages the other side tries to create!

The PCs quickly select Justin's character as their lead negotiator: he's got a Good (+3) Rapport and a Fair (+2) Will. He's not the best negotiator in the FBI, but he's the best they've got on the scene.

Brendan selects Michelle, one of the bank robbers, as the opposing lead negotiator: she's got a Great (+4) Rapport and a Good (+3) Will. The PCs will need to work hard to get her to back down and release the hostages.

PHASE 3: CREATE ADVANTAGES

Now for the fun part: each character involved in the conflict—including the lead negotiators— gets to make one create advantage roll to influence the negotiation. These rolls are based on whatever fictional positioning makes sense for the action the character takes—for example, pointing a gun at someone might let them create an advantage with Shoot. The lead negotiator can then use the free invokes generated by these rolls on the final Rapport roll.

The First to Act?

It's usually clear who should start talking in a negotiation first, but if there's any disagreement, use Empathy to determine who is first to act. A negotiation is a kind of social conflict, and those who have the emotional sensitivity to know when to talk can press the advantage. After that, you can use popcorn initiative (each player chooses who goes next) or go in order of descending Empathy.

The opposing lead negotiator resists these attempts to create advantages—usually with Will—with the hope of turning them around so they create free invokes for the opposition. Sometimes in Fate Core, a failure to create an advantage results in nothing happening; in a negotiation, it *always* leads to the opposition getting free invokes on new aspects. If one character starts waving a gun, for example, with a successful defense the opposition might create the aspect **More Guns than You** (with a free invoke) to remind the other side that they have weapons as well.

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Justin's character has the highest Empathy—Good (+3)—so he gets to act first, talking to Michelle on the phone. He decides to try to talk the robbers down a bit, calming them with Rapport: “Hey, look. I’m sure you’re not bad people. There’s no need for violence. I’m sure we all want to get out of this alive.” He succeeds against Michelle’s Will by a single shift—enough to create *No One Needs to Get Hurt* with one free invoke.

Justin passes the initiative to Marissa’s character; she decides to offer a stick to go along with Justin’s carrot. She levels a sniper rifle into the building and aligns the laser sight right on Michelle’s chest. She doesn’t say anything, but both of them understand the threat. She fails against Michelle, though, coming up short when she rolls Shoot against Michelle’s Will. Michelle says, “If you shoot me, every hostage in this place is dead, even your friend. You know that, right?” Brendan puts *Vulnerable Hostages* down as an aspect with a free invoke for the opposition.

Marissa decides to pass to Isaac’s character. He’s tied up, but he can still help with the negotiation! He Provokes the robbers: “Where are you all going to run to? You took an FBI agent hostage. The best case situation is that you put down your guns now.” He succeeds with style against Michelle’s Will, earning an aspect—*In Over Your Heads* with two free invokes.

Michelle, looking a little panicked, decides to make a show of force. She orders her men to shoot out the window at the cops, driving them back. She rolls with Shoot against Justin’s character’s Will, succeeding once she adds in a +1 for each of the other robbers. She gets *We Still Have Guns* with one free invoke.











Who gets to help?

During the create advantage phase, characters can only lend a +1 to a roll if they aren’t creating an advantage themselves. They can still, however, spend fate points to increase someone’s roll if they can invoke an appropriate aspect. Mobs, who usually have very low rolls, are usually best suited to supporting one NPC instead of trying to create advantages on their own.

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PHASE 4: MAKE A FINAL ROLL

Once the create advantage phase is over, the two lead negotiators make an opposed Rapport roll to determine the outcome of the negotiation, making use of their free invokes. The negotiation is over after this single roll—no repeats—and both sides are bound by the stakes of the negotiation.

Justin rolls      for a total of +4 before adding in any invokes; all the PCs are out of fate points, so they've got to hope their free invokes are enough. Brendan—rolling for Michelle—rolls      for a total of +7, and immediately uses her two free invokes to bring the total up to +11. Justin uses his three free invokes to get up to a +10, but it's not quite enough. The robbers win the negotiation, and the PCs are forced to help them get an escape vehicle provided they leave the hostages behind.

Of course, the mystery is just getting started...

Using Negotiations in Play

Negotiations are a great way to create drama and tension in scenes instead of throwing down into a full conflict or focusing on overcome actions through challenges. We hope you find a use for these at your table! 