3. CHARACTER-DRIVEN NARRATIVES IN D&D5E AND FATE: CORE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT
What if the characters we create in games could shape a game's storyline, making our character creation choices the driving force behind unforgettable narratives? This study explores character- driven narrative design in tabletop roleplaying-game (TTRPG) rulesets, aiming to identify features that lead to character-driven narratives. With consideration of the complexities of interactive mediums we use narratological ideas presented by Eladhari, Chatman, Todorov and others to compare the features of *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* (Wizards of the Coast 2016) and *Fate:*

Core System (Evil Hat Productions 2013). We present a promising approach for TTRPG design, and argue that *Fate: Core Systems* active approach to using character traits to generate conflict leads to more character-centric narratives when compared to the Inspiration mechanic that many *Dungeons & Dragons 5E* players are familiar with.

Keywords

INTRODUCTION

The study of character and its impact on storytelling is essential for understanding interactive media's ability to provide meaningful narrative experiences. Tabletop roleplaying games, as a longstanding form of interactive media, excel in generating character-driven narratives. In this article, we compare *Fate: Core System* and *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* (*D&D5E*) with the objective to clearly present the features that contribute to the former's effectiveness in developing narratives centered on character development and player agency. This focus is critical when considering the design of immersive platforms that rely on character-driven storytelling experiences.

Interactive media's capacity for character-driven storytelling depends on the support that the underlying systems give the participant to exercise creative freedom, to make choices, and to uniquely develop a character. This is especially relevant in tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), which Zagal and Deterding refer to as "arguably the common ancestor of all forms" of roleplaying games (2018, 27). We focus on the well-known *D&D5E*, a system that has been near-ubiquitous within CRPG design, and present *Fate: Core System* as an alternative model.

We delve into the core mechanics, rulesets, and the methods they employ to facilitate narrative progression in these two systems.

D&D5E tends to rely on systems of probability and numerical skill differentiation. While it enables vast player autonomy by means of a class-based character development, it often constricts more situational narratives, driven by encounters and challenges predefined by the Game Master (GM). In contrast, *Fate: Core System* offers a flexible system that prioritizes narrative over mechanics, which results in a stronger emphasis on individual character narratives and an overarching story. It encourages players to help shape the world and the plot, thereby strengthening the connection between character development and narrative progression.

Throughout this article, we will dissect these two systems, explore how their rulesets impact storytelling, and underscore the factors contributing to *Fate: Core System*'s success in promoting character-driven stories and enhancing player agency. Our goal is to offer insights into the design and development of immersive interactive narratives, which depend heavily on the richness and consistency of character narratives. This understanding is essential in the face of a rising trend in media that emphasizes user input, cooperation, and active engagement in the co-creation of experiences.

RULESETS AND STORIES

TTRPGs are unique media objects that foster collective narrative experiences. Players, gathered around a table, roleplay their characters, constrained by a set of rules (a ruleset) that is administered and regulated by a game master (GM). This structured yet dynamic process defines the flow of a narrative that emerges organically during the play session. Zagal and Deterding comprehensively describe TTRPGs as follows:

> "Players typically each create and then control a fictional character within a shared fictional game world, maintaining character information (possessions, specific abilities, etc.) on a piece of paper commonly called a character sheet.2 Player characters' abilities are generally quantified (e.g. strength is 15, driving skill is 12). One special

> player – called the referee, game master, judge, dungeon master, or something similar – is the arbiter and manager of the game. The referee enforces the rules of the game, enacts the fictional world by telling the players what their characters perceive and what the non-player characters (NPCs) do. Players verbally describe what they want their characters to do, and the referee tells them the results of those actions – typically using a combination of improvisation and the game's rules, where dice are often used to determine the outcome of certain actions" (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 27).

While individual players drive the narrative through their characters by responding to structured prompts, the collective creativity and improvisation result in intricate, shared journeys that can be (in retrospect) understood as stories.

A ruleset, typically presented as published material, defines a TTRPG by describing the game system, and providing guidance to the GM. The systemic parts of the ruleset – the rules – directly influence play. These can include a list of possible player actions, combat mechanics, the calculation of numerical bonuses, or the progression of character skills. Essentially, the systemic ruleset creates a structured playing field, determining the constraints of the characters and shaping the way in which they can affect the narrative world. For example, in the *Player's Handbook* the rules in chapter nine delineate the actions that players are allowed to take during combat. These are the concrete actions that players can take during a combat scenario to affect the narrative world by attacking enemies, or casting spells (Mearls and Crawford 2014, 189-198).

In addition to the systemic rules, rulebooks commonly offer the GM guidance concerning creative writing, narrative pacing, conflict resolution, and managing player dynamics. This advice assists GMs in the facilitation of engaging and dynamic play sessions, which allows them to improvise when the mechanical rules don't cover specific scenarios. For example, in the *Dungeon Master's Guide,* chapter three offers suggestions about the type of challenges that can be introduced to players to create a compelling adventure or story

(Mearls and Crawford 2014, 71-81). Although this ultimately crafts the more immersive narrative experience, this essay distinguishes between the two forms of material.

While the mechanical rules provide a standardized framework for in-game interactions and decisions, GM advice allows for adaptability and creativity, catering to the diverse range of narrative possibilities and player choices inherent in TTRPGs. However, analyzing GM advice introduces an additional layer of complexity because it requires considering the GM's skill as a variable in the discussion. The influence of GM skill on narrative can vary significantly, making it challenging to isolate the impact of the ruleset on storytelling. Conversely, the systemic rules offer standardized methods for players to interact with the world across multiple sessions. The rules provide a consistent base for character behavior, which, in turn, shapes narratives in quantifiable ways. Thus, we primarily focus on the systemic rulesets, while acknowledging that GM advice and skill play a significant but more variable role in the narrative development.

CHARACTER-DRIVEN NARRATIVES

Chatman's analysis of narrative underscores the necessity of both events and existents for a story to be constructed. In his view, a narrative cannot exist with events alone – without existents it loses its shape and structure (Story and Discourse 1978, 113). Events are further divided into actions and happenings, categories that provide a useful semiotic lens for understanding narrative dynamics. In the words of A.J. Greimas, "whereas action is dependent only on the subject concerned with the organization of his activity, [happening] can be understood as only the description of this activity by an actant external to action" (A. Greimas 1990, 176). We may exemplify the dichotomy in the sentences 'Alex killed the dragon' and 'The dragon died', where the former is an 'action' driven by Alex's murderous nature, while the latter is a mere 'happening' in a world that may (or not) include murderous Alex.

Eladhari provides another perspective to our understanding of

narratives, differentiating between impositional and expressive narratives. The former refers to narratives where the main story arc is predetermined, and the player character's involvement is primarily reactive to pre-set events. The latter, expressive narratives, are emergent and adaptive, with the game system dynamically responding to the actions and expressions of the interactors. Following our previous example, an impositional narrative dictates the dragon's death, where an interactor playing Alex as a character must find motivation to kill the dragon (experience points, want for treasure, fulfill a quest). In contrast, an emergent narrative might allow a player to play Alex as a more compassionate individual.

In the context of TTRPGs, we introduce the idea of 'character driven narrative' to refer to narratives where the character's 'actions', rather than mere reactions, shape the course of events. The level of 'character drivenness' is evaluated based on the affordances that rulesets provide players. In our comparison of *D&D5E* and *Fate: Core System*, the emphasis is on determining how expressive the player-controlled agents or characters can be within these rulesets. This expressiveness, following Eladhari, is determined by the extent to which a player acts "in a performative role, adding to the fiction or character of a game [...] world" (Eladhari 2018, 69).

Characters in TTRPGs, as described by Aldred, serve multiple functions, including representing the player in the game world and advancing the narrative. They not only serve as cursors within the gaming universe, but are also pivotal to shaping a story. As players immerse themselves in the constructed narrative of a TTRPG, their perception fluctuates between identifying personally with their characters, and viewing them as separate entities (Aldred 2014, 355). This blurring of boundaries enriches the narrative immersion. Zagal and Deterding highlight, "we negotiate the narrative by taking action and making meaningful decisions, and we are also made aware that 'what happens next' may well depend upon us, upon our decisions, our actions, our values and motivations" (2018, 275).

The intricate relationship between player and character sets the stage of a deeper examination of how character traits shape narrative

in this context. Todorov makes a distinction between psychological and apsychological narratives. This distinction helps ascertain whether an event reveals a character trait, or if a character's internal motives and thoughts drive the plot forward. In both instances, the narrative events are intrinsically linked to specific characteristics or traits of the character (Todorov 1977, 66-69). The presence of these qualities incites characters (in both print literature and games) and players (in games) to instigate events within the story, highlighting the importance of clearly defining the idea of 'trait'.

Chatman tells us that "a trait is a personal quality of a character that remains consistent and belongs to a character for the narrative section that it is assigned to" (Chatman 1978, 125). While this definition might be good for static media such as literature and film, the more interactive quality of TTRPGs requires more specific determinations that include mechanical elements to facilitate narrative construction. This construction, Fullerton highlights, finds its heart in the resolution of conflict (Fullerton 2008, 43). Our comparison of *D&D5E* and *Fate: Core System* therefore focuses on the two rulesets' approach to character traits and the way in which they affect conflict resolution.

To summarize, we understand 'character-driven narrative' in the context of tabletop role-playing games as narratives that are significantly shaped by character's actions, guided by their inherent traits. In contrast to traditional impositional narratives, where events are pre-set, this structure leans towards expressive narratives, providing characters and players with the autonomy to influence the story's progression. Character traits, defined as consistent qualities that inform their actions and decisions, are pivotal in this dynamic narrative structure, since they kindle conflicts and create engagement, contributing to an intricate psychological narrative where a character's internal motives and thoughts guide the story.

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS 5E

Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition (*D&D5E*) is designed to support a

variety of game types, which are hereby detailed. An in-depth look will be taken into Player Character (PC) construction, with a focus on the Active and Reactive traits shaped by Ability scores, Race, Class, Personality and Background elements. The relationship between the Inspiration mechanic and the PC's Personality and Background will be explored, underlining the potential for character expression within this ruleset.

Dungeons & Dragons was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, who published their first book in 1974, thus birthing the entire genre of TTRPGs (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 68). The game's fifth edition, released in 2014, was led by Mike Mearls and Jeremy Crawford, and sets out to be a "game about storytelling in worlds of swords and sorcery" (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 5), with an apparent emphasis on medieval fantasy. It balances elements of both a universal system and a house system, indicating an intended flexibility and adaptability to accommodate different settings (Zagal and Deterding 2018, 71). The number of various settings and genres of game can be seen through the many published setting books. *Spelljammer: Adventures in Space* sets the game in a pulp style sci-fi space exploration. *Eberron: Rising from the Last War* sets the game in a wartorn noir style adventure. *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* sends the players to the spooky hills of Barovia where the game becomes a gothic horror narrative. The variety of settings show that *D&D5E* has an adaptable ruleset.

However, it is notably rules-intensive. The foundation of these rules is laid out in *The Player's Handbook* and the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, but numerous other publications expand on it. Titles such as *The Monster Manual, Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes, Xanathar's Guide to Everything* and *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* introduce additional, diverse, and optional rules to enrich the gameplay experience. The *D&D5E* system determines its dice rolls by using multiple types of die, but the main dice used throughout the play is the d20, as this dice is used for everything from skill checks, to attack roll, to various other rolls (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 6-7). In the system, the dice are rolled and then a bonus (based on the character's

skill values) is added and compared to the difficulty of the roll (DC), and then a binary success or failure is assigned based on the result (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 7). This roll may also be granted Advantage or Disadvantage, which is the system whereby a player will roll two dice and take the higher or lower result respectively for any skill check, attack roll, or saving throw (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 173). The Advantage/Disadvantage mechanic is important as it later plays into rewards for characters and becomes the main way players can gain bonuses or penalties.

The mechanics that compose PCs are the basis for the systemic ruleset. These can be divided into Reactive traits and Active traits. Ability scores, Race, Class, and Background all fall under Reactive traits. We define Reactive traits as character traits that grant abilities, bonuses, or other mechanical ways for characters to overcome or exacerbate a present conflict. For example, if a character is faced with a door they cannot open, they might use these abilities to try and get through. The PCs in the system are primarily made up of five traits: Ability scores, Race, Class, Background and Personality traits (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 11-15). Ability scores, Race, Class and Background fall under the category of Reactive traits while Personality traits compose the players Active traits.

In *D&D5E* each PC has a set of six Ability scores which represent their competence in a particular ability, these are Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma respectively (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 12-13). Using these Ability scores, players define the prospective abilities the character has and how good they are at a certain task. The PC's race further augments these scores.

Each character also belongs to a certain fantasy race, which can be anything from a normal human to a Tolkien-inspired elf. This earns the player a bonus Ability score and also gives the player some special abilities that they can use (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 11). For example, players who choose to play as an Elf will find that their Dexterity score increases by 2 and they can see

comfortably in the dark (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 23). Yet, the trait that defines a PC in *D&D5E* is their Class.

At the time of writing, there are 13 official Classes; each with a multitude of specialized subclasses (D&D Beyond n.d.). These Classes and subclasses give the PCs abilities and define their systemic powers in the game. For example, a Fighter receives the ability to attack twice in a turn of combat, while a Bard can cast healing magic. This determines the main way the PCs interact with the system and the world.

Similar to Class, a character's Background grants a few additional abilities that PCs can use, and also provides a narrative backstory of what they did before they gained their Class levels (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 125). This backstory detailing however, has no systematic implications to it and merely acts as suggestion for a player. A PC's character's narrative traits end up being defined by their Personality, which constitutes the Active traits that a PC possesses.

The traits that determine the mannerism and behavior of a character in *D&D5E* are Personality traits. Each PC is expected to have a series of Personal Characteristics; these are: Personality traits, Ideals, Bonds, and Flaws. These form the basics of the character's personality, who they are, their connection to the world, and their character flaws. Personality traits are minor aspects of a PC, such as likes and dislikes. Ideals are moral and ethical principles that drive a character, such as beliefs. Bonds are a character's relationship to the world around them through specific characters and places, such as family members, rivals, or mentors. Flaws are problems that a character must grapple and deal with, such as vices or fears (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 123-124). These act as Active traits as players make their characters behave according to their various Personality traits. We define Active traits as character traits that motivate characters to act and create a new conflict. For example, a greedy character might want the treasure on the other side of the door, and thus may attempt to use their Reactive traits to get through the door. These Personality traits motivate

players to act according to these traits by rewarding them with Inspiration.

Inspiration is a boon that the GM can grant a player if they determine the player has acted according to these defined Personal Characteristics. It is measured by points, and these remain in the players possession until they decide to use them. Players can only possess one Inspiration point at a time. Players may spend points to give themselves Advantage on the next roll (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 125). By getting an Advantage, the player rolls two dice, and takes the higher one, granting them a higher chance of success. This bonus to their Reactive traits is an incentive to act according to their own character's Personality traits, but players are never forced to do this. This makes the feature optional: The player can choose to act according to these traits, and cause conflict or other difficulties for their character, but they may also choose to remain passive and reactive.

While these Personality traits serve as a cornerstone for the character-driven Inspiration mechanic, their role in driving the narrative experience beyond providing roleplay guidance appears somewhat limited.

We conclude with the thought that *D&D5E* excels at doing what Barton contends it was originally designed to do: provide players with the ability to experience immersion in worlds that are heavily based on the work of J.R.R. Tolkien (2019, 18), in which most of the character actions could be argued to be reactions to wonderfully crafted existents and events. This results in a system that facilitates the creation of impositional narratives, leaving adaptation and expression as optional features that heavily depend on the creativity and skill of both GM and player. While this model has had incredible success, we present Fate: Core System as a model that offers more guidance to construct expressive narratives.

FATE: CORE SYSTEM

Fate: Core System is designed for versatility, and can be used in a

variety of narrative settings. This system employs unique dice and ladder mechanics that classify successes and failures along a range of outcomes. Central to the game are the Aspects and Fate Points (FP) mechanics, which enable the activation of descriptors that influence the narrative by means of a game currency that is more complex than *D&D5E's* Inspiration Points. These systemic rules facilitate the dynamic emergence of narrative during gameplay.

Fate: Core System was created by Rob Donoghue and Fred Hicks in early 2003, and the newest edition, *Fate: Core System*, was released in 2013 by Evil Hat Productions. It aspires to be a flexible and stream-lined TTRPG ruleset for players to use in a multitude of differently-themed game worlds (Balsera 2013, 71). Some examples include an ancient Roman noire world (*Eagle Eyes*), a Jane Austen inspired Victorian steampunk setting (*Romance is in the Air*), a sci-fi themed exploration of the benthic frontier (*Deep Dark Blue*), and a gothic vampire infested Wild-Western America (*Blood on the Trail*). This adaptability makes the systemic portion of the ruleset less strictly mechanized.

Characters within *Fate: Core System,* just like *D&D5E,* are composed of Reactive and Active traits. Reactive traits are mechanics such as skills, stunts, stress, and consequences. These traits can be considered reactive as they are used by players to obtain a goal, overcome a challenge, or react to an attack. These skills do not particularly motivate the characters to act. Motivation is structured by the unique Active trait, Aspects.

Aspects, alongside Fate Points (FP) and the Compel mechanic are the defining features of *Fate: Core System*. They are defined as "a phrase that describes something unique or noteworthy about whatever it's attached to" (Balsera 2013, 56). In this system, characters, objects, locations, events, and the themes of the game session itself are assigned various Aspects (Balsera 2013, 57). This means that Aspects are involved in anything that happens in the game. Barring special cases, such as having the Aspect 'Ruthless Killer' in a murder mystery game, where Aspects must be kept secret, all Aspects are known to all the players at the table.

Each PC in Fate is made up of five unique Aspects. These Aspects

are a High Concept, a Trouble, and The Phase Trio, which is made up of three Aspects (Balsera 2013, 30). The latter determine the main ways in which players act within the diegetic world and the narrative. It is through these Aspects that players are encouraged (if not forced) to be proactive and participate in a "tabletop roleplaying game, about proactive, capable people who lead dramatic lives" (Evil Hat Productions n.d.). Moving forward, we explore these five Aspects.

The High Concept of a character in Fate is what defines them in a short phrase. It "sums up what your character is about – who he is and what he does. It's an aspect, one of the first and most important ones for your character." (Balsera 2013, 32). Examples of these include: 'Detective for Hire', 'Soccer Mother of 4', or 'Overworked Academic Scribe'. This aspect creates the image of a person in players' heads and is the primary tool used to communicate the players' assumed identity and role within the narrative construction process.

The next Aspect is the Trouble Aspect. This Aspect defines a part of the character that makes life difficult for them in the narrative. This aspect can be anything from personal struggles emotional or physical, or relationships with family members (Balsera 2013, 34). This Aspect is unique; if it is Compelled by the GM, a player must spend an FP to reject this. This makes it a harder Aspect to mitigate, since players must use an FP to avoid this complication. Eventually the player runs out of FP and will be forced to act accordingly.

The Phase Trio are Aspects of secondary importance, but they add more intricacy to a character. These are related to Personality traits or relationships developed during three adventures (Balsera 2013, 38). Along with the other two, they can be invoked by players for systemic advantages if they are related to a situation presented by the GM as play develops (Balsera 2013, 68). For example, if a character has the Aspect 'Always dressed to kill' they may more easily impress another character with their appearance if the Aspect is invoked during play. Aspects that are invoked must be relevant to the scene in which they take place. These Aspects are invoked using FP.

FPs are a non-diegetic currency the players can accumulate and spend to activate Aspects. Each player receives a set amount of FP at

the start of every game session, and they can be regained if another player Compels an Aspect. This allows for an exchange of players Compelling and using FP to dramatically change the direction the narrative takes. For example, the GM can Compel a player's Aspect to introduce a complication in the scene, such as a problematic NPC from the character's past. The player gains an FP from this, and uses it to Compel a different characters Aspect to introduce more complications into the scene. This makes the narrative construction process more cooperative, as it gives the players ways to introduce dramatic scenes into the game. Though the GM still acts as enforcer and arbiter, players can also act as storytellers rather than just actors.

Compelling is the main mechanic that allows characters to be active character-driven participants of the narrative. "If [the PC is] in a situation where having or being around a certain aspect [means their] character's life is more dramatic or complicated, someone can compel the aspect" (Balsera 2013, 71). Compelling an Aspect is an action that another player or the GM can do non-diegetically. A player, whose character's Aspect is Compelled, must take a relevant action to generate conflict for their character.

There are two different types of Compels: event-based Compels, which cause problem scenarios to arise; and decision-based Compels, which force characters to pursue certain Aspects (Balsera 2013, 71-77). As an example of an event-based Compel, a character with the Aspect 'Missing Father' might run across their father, find a clue relevant to their father's location, or meet the character that kidnapped their father. As an example of a decision- based Compel, the same character might decide to break into the building where they think there might be a clue, get enraged at a discussion going on about the great relationship an NPC has with their father, or leave a scene to look for their father.

The Compel mechanic allows the PC to actively seek encounters, or have the willingness to act within a scene. In combination with Aspects that list the major traits of a character, FPs that reward players for accepting Compels and Compelling other PC's aspects,

and a system that creates conflict relevant to the character *Fate: Core System* allows Active traits to play a significant role within the game.

Distinguishing the Compel mechanic from comparable game features is essential for its comprehensive understanding, especially when considering similar features in other rule sets. In *D&D5E* there are certain abilities that allow players to take control of other characters in a similar way. For example, the *Charm Person*, *Compelled Duel*, and *Dominate Person* spells all force a character to make decisions based on what another PC or NPC commands (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 221-235). These force characters to make certain decisions and get themselves into conflict, however, these are all diegetic and not choices the characters made themselves, or dramatic scenes that the players forced upon them. These types of abilities would be considered reactive, as characters use these abilities to overcome a challenge or accomplish a goal, and characters are simply being affected by an ability.

We conclude that *Fate: Core System* is a universal system suitable for any kind of diegetic world or story. Characters within it, just like in *D&D5E,* are composed of active and Reactive traits but the defining feature of the system are Aspects. Aspects are short phrases that define traits about characters. These Aspects can be activated using Fate Points, a non-diegetic currency. Once activated they can either be used for a mechanical bonus through Invoking, or they can be Compelled. Compelling an Aspect allows the GM or player to introduce a complication into the scene or force a character to act in a certain way that gets them into the conflict. This allows character-driven narrative generation, as players, to Compel Aspects to use their PC's traits to drive a narrative. We believe this system to be a guide to generating more expressive narratives, as it turns narrative construction from a reaction-based process into a more active one.

CONFLICT GENERATION IN D&D5E AND FATE: CORE SYSTEM

So far, we have established that character traits are the engine of

TTRPGs, driving events and shaping stories, and that characters exist as distinct, yet crucial entities within the narrative fabric through which they participate in a construction process in active or reactive ways. These relationships give birth to what we refer to as 'character-driven narrative,' where the personality and qualities of PCs generate and drive conflict. Both *D&D5E* and *Fate: Core System* facilitate such narratives, leveraging their unique rulesets. By examining and evaluating the effectiveness in which each system deals with conflict, a clearer understanding of their respective roles in generating narratives centered around character development can be presented.

As Fullerton explains, conflict emerges from elements such as challenges, opponents, puzzles, or dilemmas. Players are tasked with navigating and resolving these conflicts using the rules of the game (2008, 77). Though this idea is specific to ludic environments restricted in stringent rule systems, it works from a narrative perspective as well. As explained in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, conflict in a narrative refers to the opposition that arises between characters or ideas (Abrams and Geoffrey 2008, 265). Conflict tends to arise when clashing goals appear within a text. This applies to TTRPGs, in the sense that, when PCs are faced with challenges that they must overcome that prevent them from getting to their goal, conflict is created.

D&D5E Reactive traits are used to overcome, or exacerbate, an already existing conflict. Racial traits or abilities are used to overcome challenges that the GM has prepared ahead of time. There is no overlap between the reactive traits and the Active traits within *D&D5E,* as none of the Reactive traits generate narrative moments. For example, a player having a low Strength score might find themselves being unable to climb a cliff face. However, this trait did not systematically generate this challenge: the existence of the cliff face was entirely the responsibility of the GM, and the motivations of the character for climbing this cliff face were determined in other diegetic nonsystematic way.

In *D&D5E,* the GM typically crafts conflict ahead of time and then introduces them to players. Players, however, are able to spark conflict through Active traits. Personality traits serve as roleplaying

guides that can trigger in-scene conflicts, and this is incentivized with Inspiration Points. Yet, the effectiveness of this incentive can be undermined by the system's reward structure. The advantage granted by spending Inspiration Points, which improves a single roll, isn't a unique reward – many other in-game scenarios, such as assisting another character, also provide this advantage (Mearls and Crawford, Player's Handbook 2014, 173). This lack of uniqueness may fail to motivate players to act according to roleplay in this way, as the reward they would receive for doing this can easily be obtained in other ways. Consequently, players might not feel encouraged to fully utilize their characters' traits.

Fate: Core System, similar to *D&D5E,* has Reactive traits and Active traits. A difference between the two systems is that, in *Fate: Core System,* the Aspect mechanic works both as a Reactive and as an Active trait. This is because, though Aspects can be used to overcome or exacerbate conflict, it can also create an entirely new conflict. This is performed either by Compelling a decision or an event-based Aspect. This forces the scene to be relevant to the character's direct traits and forces them to take action relevant to their traits. It directly uses a mechanical rule system to generate a conflict based on a PC's traits. *Fate: Core System*, through Invoking and Compelling mechanics, narrows down the endless possibility of narratives, and focuses on specific traits that PCs possess, making the game, by necessity, character-driven. This does a much better job than *D&D5E* at consistently generating character-driven narratives.

There are, however, some potential problems with *Fate: Core System*'s approach to generating narratives. The events that are triggered, and decisions that are made, become limited, as players are heavily motivated and often forced to act according to five Aspects determined by character creation. This can limit the freedom to explore other sides of characters by boiling down multiple traits into small phrases. Similarly, if characters, as they are in *Fate: Core System,* are immediately forced to act upon their traits, it deprives that character of choice and makes them direct functions of plot, as is the case with apsychological narratives.

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CONCLUSION

In this analysis, we have discussed the concept of 'character-driven narrative' as it relates to tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), distinguishing it as a process of narrative construction that is significantly influenced by character actions motivated by their inherent traits. Unlike traditional impositional narratives with predetermined events, character-driven narratives lean towards an expressive style, offering players a degree of control over the story's progression. Herein, character traits are identified as consistent qualities that inform 'action' and play a pivotal role in structuring narrative by kindling conflict and fostering engagement.

Our comparison of the two popular TTRPGs, *Dungeons and Dragons 5th Edition* and *Fate: Core System*, showed how each system approaches character-drivenness in their narrative construction process. *D&D5E*, a rules-intensive system, embraces a medieval fantasy aesthetic, and relies on binary success-failure outcomes derived from dice rolls. Although the comprehensive character creation process affords deep customization and the defining of unique Personality traits, the role of these traits in driving the narrative seems limited. They predominantly serve as a basis for the Inspiration Point mechanic, but the limited use of Inspiration Points is a poor motivator. Thus, *D&D5E* excels in constructing impositional narratives, with characters reacting to intricately crafted existents and events. Yet the potential for adaptability and expression in this system heavily relies on the creativity and skill of both the GM and the player.

Conversely, *Fate: Core System* presents a universal system apt for any story setting. Its key feature, Aspects, are short phrases that define character traits, and they can be activated using a more complex system, Fate Points. Activation can result in either a mechanical bonus through Invoking or Compelling, where a complication is introduced into the scene, or a character is forced to behave in a way that triggers conflict. This mechanic enables character-

driven narratives by allowing players to participate in the narrative creation process by using their character's traits, thus fostering a more communicative process.

The difference between the two systems is evident in their approach to rewards. In *D&D5E*, the ubiquitous nature of Advantages may lead to a reduction in player motivation to role play, and therefore a reduction in character-drivenness in the resulting narratives. On the other hand, *Fate: Core System* utilizes mechanics like Invoking and Compelling to manifest specific character traits in several possible ways, making the game intrinsically character-driven.

Both systems have their merits and niches, depending on the desired narrative experience, however. *D&D5E* fosters a more controlled setting with its very well delineated array of rules. *Fate: Core System* offers a framework that promotes expressive narratives, centered around character traits. In both cases, the way in which both rulesets define traits is the basis of player interaction with the fictional world, as they define their active participation and the joint crafting of an experience.

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