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Succession

by

Alasdair Sinclair

Blurb

Vito's been shot. His blood splatters your faces and hands as you apply pressure, desperate for the Capofamiglia to hold on just a bit longer, until the ambulance can get here. The gunmen were well armed, and well informed, hitting him leaving his private apartment on the way to the sit-down: there was nothing you could do. It was lucky that more of you weren't caught in the flying death.

The sirens approach, but his blood covers the curb, his breath is ragged. Vito is gone.

The king is dead, and your enemies will act swiftly. Some for power, some for revenge, some simply seeking to take what's yours. Tonight a wave of blood and retribution will flow into the streets, and the new king will be coroneted in blood.

- This is a non-linear game with no predetermined outcomes or plot path: the decisions the characters make will determine entirely what happens in the game.

- Intra-party conflict is expected, as those with different agendas determine who's way is right, and who will be left bleeding

System: The Mountain Witch
System Knowledge: Not Needed
Number of Players: 3-4
Genre: Underworld Drama
Genre Knowledge: Useful
Role-playing Knowledge: Indie game experience useful
Style: Character-driven
Classification: R

Chapter One: Preface

Acknowledgements

Sophie Melchior met with me one afternoon to brainstorm a KapCon game that we never wrote, but which became this the year after.

Playtesters

Nick Adams, Glenn Bellam, Nick Cole, James Glover, Steve Hickey, Russ Kale, Andrew MacLeod

Reviewers

This game was kindly peer-reviewed by (alphabetically): Morgan Davie, Sara Fletcher, Dan L'Estrange & Paul Wilson.

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Chapter Two: Playing the Game

System

This game uses a hack of *The Mountain Witch* as its fundamental mechanic. The key concept for *The Mountain Witch* is that the players use unfolding events to illustrate their specific "Dark Fate". In *Succession* this is modified by the addition of a revenge clause - instead of a single ethereal "Mountain Witch", each character has his or her own axe to grind. This gives the game a stronger and more specific arc narrative than the original *Mountain Witch* but the fundamental concept still applies. Players will be primarily responsible for framing scenes that push the story towards resolving their fates, and the GM is primarily responsible for guiding the story and helping to apply pressure to the PCs.

I think it is very unlikely that you could successfully run this game without a passing familiarity with the original game. I recommend buying a copy - it's one of the best-value games on the market.

Dark Fates

All the Dark Fates from the rulebook apply:

- Desperately in love
- Past Allegiance
- Revenge
- True Motives
- Unholy Pact
- Worst Fear

In addition, each player must nominate a specific vendetta for their character that was forbidden by the head of the family. Now that this barrier is removed, either the PC or their nominated nemesis is free to seek a full measure of revenge.

Signs of the Zodiac

The star-sign of the characters has almost no significance to the culture of the mobsters. Instead, the characters should be offered a choice of front operations, legal or quasi-legal business interests which either offer the veneer of respectability, or a logistical support base. A list is below, and should be dispensed in the same manner as the dark fates.

- Laundry
- Funeral Parlour
- Casino/Speakeasy

Small hotel
 Truck Depot
 Workshop
 Pawnshop

Bear in mind that in the 1920s, all of these establishments were different to their modern counterparts, generally being less specialised. For example, in the trucking industry, it was individual truck-drivers who'd make the entrepreneurial decisions of what goods to transport, they weren't simply hauliers, so the opportunity and motive for all kinds of criminal activities were greater and more diverse. Police oversight and regulation were more relaxed across the board too.

All of these locations represent a character's stake in the future of the city. The locations are a source of revenue and labour, as well as a target for retribution from their nemeses.

Character Sheet Template

Name

Dark Fate

Front

Who will you try and kill, or who will try and kill you, now that Vito's protection is gone?

Allies begin with Trust 3 - this should be all PCs in this scenario

Abilities

Damage: Flesh Wounds / Chapter Wounds / Permanent Wounds

Trust

Your Trust / Character / Their Trust

Chapter Three: Setting

Locations

Fronts

Where possible, try and orient the game back to the characters' fronts. By locating the action in their own territory you accomplish several things.

Firstly, it helps to make the stakes of the game concrete and familiar - it is much easier for a player to care about you burning down a pawnshop that they have described to you than one which is mentioned on the character sheet but has never been in play.

Secondly, it helps to place the onus for scene framing and action generation on the characters - they will be more comfortable exerting their power over locations where their characters have power.

Thirdly, it helps to limit the number of locations that you need to manage, while also lifting the burden of describing locations from your already-heavy workload.

City Hall

City Hall is the location of the central police, if any, as well as the civil administration. The main choice you need to make is whether the police are clean or corrupt, and what level of power they wield. You should look at the nemeses to help make this decision - if the nemeses include city officials, it's a sure bet that the civil administration and police are riddled with corruption. If the crime is all in the game, to use a *Wire* phrase, then the police might be honest but overwhelmed or unable to quell the violence.

Neutral Ground

Every city has neutral ground, where the various factions can feel relatively safe about either meeting or hiding out. This is, of course, never truly safe, but it is somewhere which will sound plausible for meetings.

Downtown

In *Red Harvest* the centre of the city becomes a de facto war zone, but this has obvious problems with the suspension of disbelief in a con game. Generally the centre of town should be viewed as too heavily protected for anything particularly overt in the warfare.

Shipping Hub

Most cities will have one or maybe two central places where goods arrive and get stored and sorted out. In coastal cities, this might be docks. In a landlocked city, this will probably be some combination of train depot. Either way, these areas are filled with large and largely empty spaces, and are generally far enough from the citizenry that they will have a small police presence.

NPCs

Crudely speaking, all NPCs that occur in the game fall into four categories:

1. Allies
2. Enemies
3. Bystanders
4. Leverage

In this game, you will want to minimise the number of real allies that the PCs can draw on, because the more assistance they have the less pressure they'll feel. If they do have an ally of importance, that ally should be positioned such that a betrayal will have severe consequences. Whether they do or not, the PCs will expect to be screwed in a game like this, and so they will add to the tension either way.

Bystanders are dramatically uninteresting, so you should limit the number of these as much as possible. If possible, non-combatants should be positioned as leverage either way - people that the PCs could hurt to get at their enemies, or vice versa.

Nemeses

The most important NPCs in the game are the characters' nemeses. In game terms, these should be similar to the Mountain Witch - not especially tough to defeat in a straight fight. If a particularly simple-minded or direct group of PCs simply decide to move from nemesis to nemesis executing the problems, then you may need to revise this, principally by giving them allies and piling on story consequences for such straightforward slaughter. Ideally in this situation, you should try and redirect the PCs efforts at slaughter internally, but this is the game's Achilles heel - a group that decides not to play the scenario or their characters.

The Family

The loyalty of any other members of the family should be open to question. The PCs will be among the contenders to be the next king, but there should be at least one other and probably leading contender as an NPC. Ideally, one or more players will have been savvy enough to position their nemesis

in this crucial story function. Let the players take the lead in introducing members of the family - that will help establish their presence quickly.

The Cops

As discussed in the "City Hall" section, the Cops may be overwhelmed, or they may be corrupt. They should definitely not be efficient and in control of the situation. In the 1920s there were far fewer restrictions on the behaviour that a policeman could get away with in pursuit of their duties, for example, it was before Miranda so there was not necessarily a clear directive to read a suspect their rights. Police methods were open to much less scrutiny, so coercive techniques (i.e. beating someone with a phone book) were more common and had a much less sure recourse through the legal system. Similarly their powers of search and seizure were, in effect, greater.

The Feds

The 1920s was before the formation of the FBI, so the federal authorities are mostly in the form of Pinkerton's agents and Prohibition agents. Pinkerton's was essentially an arm of the nascent corporate state and so was mostly involved either with crimes that crossed state lines and with strike-breaking. It's unlikely they'd be involved in anything that's likely to happen in the adventure. Prohibition agents are essentially police concerned with alcohol and so may be relevant.

The other main federal authorities that could intervene if the situation deteriorates far enough on a wide-enough scale are the National Guard and the Federal Army. In this game, they would come in and institute martial law and a curfew. In practical terms, that probably spells the end of the game, and probably a quite satisfactory ending which puts the criminal underworld conflict in stasis but with a gratifying sense of blood spilt.

Rival Syndicates

The Rival Syndicates will almost certainly need to be created from the individual nemeses specified by the players. In the unlikely event that your group has collectively specified all of their nemeses as either policemen or factions within their own family, then your need for a rival syndicate will probably be slight. In that situation, the PCs may be seeking an ally in their battles, and that should mean the advice offered above about allies should apply.

Chapter Four: Running the Game

Procedural

The "investigative game" is a well-known plot and so players will instinctively try and play the game in that mode. Don't let them. This is not a procedural game where a trail of clues can be followed to piece together an elaborately set-up game, and if you begin to let them treat it that way you will use all of your creative energy trying to make the plot work on the fly rather than driving the human drama of the characters.

You can't simply deny them information, because that is the equivalent of "blocking" in theatre improv and will frustrate them. Most investigation questions will be phrased as a way of finding out specific facts when really what the player is doing is trying to build a theory of the crime. These kinds of questions should be redirected back to the player character so that some or other broadly plausible theory of the crime is supported, but without providing any conclusive proof to support it. Once a theory of the crime is established in a player's mind, they will begin to act in response to that crime and you can start to massage the details of the narrative to fit.

For example, immediately after the shooting, a player might ask "What kinds of guns were used by the shooters?" They are probably trying to figure out whether the hit was professional, military or personal. You could redirect by asking them what level of security they had and what level of surprise they felt at the shooting.

If a suitable redirection doesn't occur to you, distract them from their attempts to find out information by inserting some pressure - police sirens, a man with a gun, or something.

Once the action is underway, most players will quickly find themselves too busy for detailed forensic examination of the scene.

In summary:

There is a central mystery, but the object is to use that as a prompt for action, rather than be a spine for an essentially procedural story. Who killed Vito will be a function of who the PCs suspect, and who they pursue.

Whenever the investigation appears to be either stalling or becoming procedural, toss a grenade into the room.

Timing

The game will unfold in several phases; the boundaries between these phases may not be clear cut and the game may segue between different phases. It is important that some time is spent in each of the different phases so that the narrative inside the game is complete. I suggest the following timing guideline:

Player briefing - 30 minutes
 Blood on the floor - 15 minutes
 On the hunt - 2 or 3 blocks of 30 or 20 minutes
 Showdown - 20 minutes
 Consolidation - 20 minutes
 Trust Adjustment - 20 minutes
 Wrap & Debrief - 10 minutes

= 175 minutes

The PCs should have 3 or 4 chances to adjust their trust over the course of the game, so make sure you keep an eye on the chances to do that. Each time they need to adjust their trust by secret ballot will take 5 minutes.

Given that almost all convention games start 5-10 minutes late and that timing of individual phases will be different, that gives you around 0 to -5 minutes of time to spend on contingencies. This means that time is tight, and you must keep the players focused and on-topic. The trust rounds represent the main chance for the players to take a break, and you should encourage them to use those 5 minutes to break for the bathroom or eat snacks or unwind as applicable in addition to the reallocation of trust.

You might find 30 minutes seems like a long time to get the players briefed and the game underway, but this is a crucial step in the game, where they will generate in their own minds the material that they need to make the game interesting and rewarding. You will also need a few minutes of that time to start to sketch possible connections between the nemeses and fronts.

Player Briefing

The player briefing is a chronically under-done part of most convention games, but because this game needs a high level of player engagement (it is not a "tunnel of fun") this needs to be handled carefully and needs to establish the tone quickly.

A tentative briefing agenda is shown below.

Scenario pitch - what game they're here to play

Setting - Prohibition America

System - *Mountain Witch*

Trust

Player scene framing

Dark Fates

Fronts

Nemeses

Player driven game

Blood on the floor

Before the opening scene, you should review the nemeses that have been created by the players and try and think about which of them could carry out the hit, and how they would go about it. Bear in mind that while one of the nemeses might have carried out the hit, it may be at the instigation of another, so even if the evidence clearly points to one or other faction, that may not be the whole story.

The main objectives of this scene are to setup the game *in media res*, with action already underway. You should help frame the scene such that the PCs are already under pressure, already feeling short on time but with a number of avenues to explore.

On the Hunt

The central action of the game will be mostly up to the course that the PCs take. As a general guide, groups will generally go through something like the following stages in the main part of the adventure.

1. Investigate the crime, trying to come up with a plausible theory of who did it; this will usually involve a bit of amateur forensics and a lot of questioning. As discussed, try and redirect and deflect this becoming a procedural while providing enough information for them to move forward.

2. Meeting with other mobsters and allies to try and form a power bloc to respond to Vito's slaying and the mechanism for taking out the guilty parties.

3. Betrayals, as the Dark Fates start to kick into real effect.

Showdown

Eventually, a specific nemesis or combination of nemeses will be identified as needing to get got, or the PCs will

decide that the only viable course of action is to settle the succession among themselves. In noir generally, show-downs are short and brutal, without too much speak-making.

Consolidation

After the violence has officially ended, you should pull the players back out of the fiction and resolve the near future of the organisation. This should be a collaborative process without interference from mechanics where the players work towards some kind of consensus. This helps to cycle down any tension from the intra-party conflict, and helps make the game feel complete.

Bangs

Scenes within the game are player-driven. Players will be involved in framing them and then involved in forming the conflicts inside them. However, players don't have a holistic understanding of how the game fits together, and they may be unwilling to force conflicts. The GM will need to inject action into the game at occasions, and these are done through *Bangs*. Bangs can take almost any form, but the key to an effective bang is in giving it sufficient punch that it demands immediate action and attention, and that it changes the shape of the game. The main thing that can go wrong is lacking punch, so that it feels like informational content. Whatever it is, it should compel action. The Dark Fates and Fronts are your main source of material for bangs, and you should really hit those targets hard and below the belt.