

ZERO AT THE BONE

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Zero at the Bone is my attempt at a mode of play which I typically avoid: mostly Drama-driven, with a lot of emphasis on agreements at the Social Contract level. I've put effort mainly into enjoining no use of Force by the GM, and into structural features of play which bring Premise into the choices facing the characters, but no behavioral rules which constrain those choices.

The core idea is to impose an extremely clear IIEE mechanic, such that everyone knows when actions take place and the extent to which they can help or hinder one another, but what those actions are, and what they accomplish, is announced with considerable freedom by the player running that character. Larger-scale effects of actions and scenes are the GM's province, as are scene framing, pressure through NPCs' actions, and what I'm calling the "flashpoint" technique. There are no behavioral mechanics, no Fortune-based "success" outcomes (although Fortune gives the opportunity for actions to inhibit other actions), and no integration among the reward and resolution systems.

Design notes: The big risk in presenting this proto-game is that I expect people to mistake it for *the* exemplar Narrativist game design. That's not the case. Just as with Mongrel and Black Fire, it's a theory-driven exercise in mechanics and concepts, aimed at some specific details of its mode which I think have been overlooked historically. But just because "Ron's the Narrativist guy" and because "this is the Narrativist essay," it's likely that Zero at the Bone is going to be inappropriately tagged as "the ultimate Narrativist game, according to self-proclaimed guru," etc, etc. So I beg of you, whoever's reading this, don't do that. There's no such ultimate Narrativist game. Also, I'm especially worried that its narration elements (Drama resolution) will be perceived as its primary Narrativist feature. Please don't do that either. As the essay states, Narrativist play is quite do-able using Fortune-based games without much if any chance to revise what the dice tell you.

So what's it about? Think of sleeper and semi-sleeper agents of various international intelligence agencies scattered across eastern Europe before the Berlin Wall came down. However, don't get too realistic about it; think more in terms of the vague and dangerous world occupied by the spies of John LeCarre, especially when no orders are clear, no gathered information is 100% reliable, and everyone works both sides of the fence just to stay alive. The agents are largely autonomous and not especially sure if they'll ever be safe. Some good references might include the comics 100 Bullets, to some extent, and Sleeper, without the super-powers. In fact, lose the whole romantic notion of spies as super-trained and super-equipped. They're skilled, but highly vulnerable.

Now for the pressure: "the cold" refers to the situation of a spy who suspects his orders are compromised, may well have been blown (identified by the opposition), and has no recourse to and quite possibly faces retribution from his own side. For the title, I've lifted a line from Emily Dickinson, which in her poem "A narrow fellow in the grass" indicates a gut reaction upon seeing a snake, with the larger implication of a premonition of death.

That's what's happened to the characters, and they are not only out in the cold, but it's eating at them from the inside.

But is it all vague and depressing chilliness? No! All bets are off. Every character, regardless of nationality or affiliation, has received "code red" instructions - meaning they are to do whatever most extreme act that they have been warned they might have to do. But those instructions might be compromised, a ruse from the opposition to flush them out. And such a compromised agent might be in grave danger from his own allies, who must eliminate him before he gives away his position and his extreme orders. The characters all know that the other player-characters are spies, but all they know about one another are the cover identities. They must move, aggressively - to do what, only they will know.

Specific setting and situation

The game does best for participants to set the setting parameters together, somewhere in eastern Europe, some time after 1945 but prior to the Berlin Wall's coming down. They should pick a city or small area including a city, and come up with some of the possible issues of international intelligence and perhaps movement of persons associated with that locale. They should also bandy about some possibilities concerning the local power structure, which almost certainly plays super-power influences off against one another regardless of its nominal allegiance.

It's good to know what languages are common in the area, what kind of local police or external military groups are active, and what life-styles are like. It would certainly include a thriving black market and perhaps "gangs" (or rather, neighborhood governments, depending on who you're talking to). Again, I suggest aiming at atmosphere and relationships rather than gritty historical realism, but speaking for myself, I think a little research into relevant areas would not only be fun and useful for play, (soapbox) but also valuable personal enrichment (/soapbox off).

As far as the specific situation is concerned, the GM should avoid the concept of some mastermind who's carrying out some plan which has caused the confusion of information facing the player-characters. Certainly corruption or dis-information may be playing a role as well, but in the big picture, at most, some event of international significance has merely tangled up who's telling whom what to a dangerous degree. The GM should rather focus on keeping the ambiguities and suspicious actions on the part of superiors going, as well as permitting only intermittent contact with them in the first place.

Plenty of NPCs can be suggested during this stage of preparation as well, many of whom might show up as contacts for one or more player-characters later. The GM should definitely compile a list of nationally and ethnographically appropriate names to use during play.

Character creation

For each character, make up the following.

- The character's name - contrary to popular belief, the characters will probably use their real names, working as much of their real pasts as possible into their

cover identities. This is key: they do not have the option of shucking their cover-role and going back to "real lives."

- The character's cover: job, identity, and residence, as well as a set of friends and associates.
- In one particular way, each character is exceptionally dangerous in a confrontation, as decided by the player.
- State what national interest the character represents, i.e., works for. Optionally, the character may be a double agent, in which case state the real employer as well. Also optionally, the character may be a paid but unofficial agent, obligated only to the official agent who uses them as a contact.
- List the following individuals (players may choose to collaborate to share NPCs):
 - Who is the character's official superior contact, and why can't he or she trust his information
 - Who are some of the character's informal contacts and sources of information
 - Who is the character's most feared enemy on his or her side
 - Who is the character's most reliable friend on the other side
- State the "code red" instructions the character has received

The only information one is obliged to reveal to the other players are the name and cover material. Revealing any other information is entirely optional, all the way up to full disclosure at the beginning among everyone. But no matter what, characters begin play only knowing one another's cover information and what side each character is on - or nominally on, if the character is a double agent.

All characters are already competent at armed and unarmed combat - not ninja-level, not Bond-level, but competent. They speak all languages that are relevant to their positions, they are skilled at forging official documents of all kinds, and they have a variety of unofficial contacts they've built up over the time they've been active as spies. They do not have unusual climbing skills, stealth abilities, high-tech security systems knowledge, computer hacking skills, gadgetry of any kind, nor acrobatic abilities.

Now for the wicked part, which one reviewer described as "dangerous and wrong." Every player writes down the worst thing someone whom he or she knows has really done on a slip of paper, and all the slips go into a hat. The GM reads them all. Now, every player picks a paper from the hat, and his or her character is now conceived as having done that thing, which is called the *Wrongdoing*. The rest of playing the game may be seen, perhaps, as Karma (the philosophical concept, not the game-mechanics term) in action.

Clearly, the Wrongdoing may or may not be directly related to the character's role as a spy. That's customized as the player sees fit, as well as whether the character feels remorse about it to any degree. The players keep their characters' Wrongdoings secret, but one of the most important parts of play is how they get revealed, as explained in the Reward system section below.

Design notes: This is, as far as I can tell, the only way to seize Premise by the throat in a Narrativist design that focuses on mostly-Drama resolution and on

avoiding mechanics-based constraints or even labels on character behavior. It's based on a couple of assumptions: (1) that no man is an island, sufficient to play Narrativist in the safety of his own head; and (2) that revelation of oneself through judgment upon (fictional) others is fundamental to this mode. It is designed to elicit Premise through gut reactions, to embed them into Exploration in an unavoidable fashion, and to be intimately linked to the reward system rather than the resolution system. The hope is that people's judgments on the Wrongdoings will enter into play through the helping and hindering mechanics presented below. So I'm kind of curious to see how it'd play out in reality.

How it's supposed to go

Play proceeds through rapid cutting from character to character, with the GM applying intense pressure through both confrontation and lack of response, until each character is positioned into a conflict situation. By "conflict," I mean a direct threat to the life of the character or to a very close associate, someone the character would at least consider saving. When they're all there, it's called the "the flashpoint."

What does the GM do? There must be adversity, and it must be concrete. His or her watchwords are: specific, bloody or potentially bloody, mysterious, cruel, and significant. Play official stuff, play NPC agents, play law-enforcement or political organizations of all kinds, play contacts, and play friends and family. Develop as many opportunities for direct danger from external sources as possible, but maintaining a threatening vagueness about who might have ordered it, or what (mis)information the threatening parties might be acting upon. Feel free to be dramatic with car bombs, threats, attempts at surveillance, roughing-up, imprisonment, and whatever else.

The GM should avoid the temptation to use "you like" or "you dislike" statements or other behaviorally-controlling means of positioning characters into motivated conflicts. Let the motivations and responses and depths of loyalty or ruthlessness arise strictly from the players's own choices in adversity.

Which leads into, what do the players do? Given that they know that the character's old life is essentially over, their decisions should center around what, if anything, they want to survive the storm. Is it your best friend, regardless of what side he's on, if any? Is it a cache of wealth for your family, regardless of your own fate? Is it completing that one last mission against the hated other side, regardless of the human cost? The expectation for players is that they hurl themselves into the desperate frenzy of making such decisions, including the possibility of temporary or permanent alliances - or showdowns - among player-characters.

Design notes: This is a little bit like Black Fire, but I learned it from Narrativist play, especially using Sorcerer and Dust Devils. Whenever we're "just playing," everyone knows the goal is to get to the flashpoint so that the resolution system can interpose its (with any luck) fruitful constraints, and thus the real decisions of play can hit like freight trains. This leads to a lot of collaborative pacing, including tension-building delays and "rests" as well as get-to-it intensity. I've found that a lot of Narrativist play benefits from the flashpoint technique, such that everyone is engaged in the conflict resolution at once, even if their

characters are separated in space and perhaps even in time.

Resolution during non-Flashpoint play is best described as, "Player proposes, GM disposes," meaning that the player states what the character is doing, and the GM simply says whether it works or not. The GM is constrained by the points about character capabilities, above, and should not violate basic parameters for them - they do know how to shoot, they do know how to speak, say, Rumanian (locale permitting), and so on. Whether their attempts *work* or not is the GM's province, during this phase of play. If the situation reaches the point where the GM's word isn't good enough, then that's a sign that the character has reached the flashpoint. The group's attention should then switch to another character, and then another, such that everyone will be there.

Flashpoint situations can range across all sorts of conflicts. As one character is desperately jumping from the top of one train passenger-car to another, another character might be sweating it out at a checkpoint, hoping his forged papers will get him through, and yet another might be trying to convince his not-too-bright friend to flee the country.

Flashpoint layout

The GM has shuffled together the high cards from a standard 54-card deck. Which cards are used varies with the number of players. The GM is assigned the ace and each of the other players is assigned a rank (king, queen, jack, and if there's a fourth player, the ten).

When everyone's ready for the flashpoint, the GM deals five cards in a row, face up. Each card is a stated action; when it comes up, reading from the left, that player gets to "go."

But first, apply a modified version of the card game Accordion to the cards, starting from the right. So the rightmost player can, if possible, move his card to the left as follows.

1. If the card to the immediate left matches his card in either rank or suit, his card may be moved to cover it.
2. If the card three cards to the left, i.e. separated by two cards in between, matches his card in either rank or suit, his card may be moved to cover it.

Don't cover a card completely; leave the top exposed so the rank and suit can be identified. Also, if the player chooses not to move his card, he doesn't have to.

Once this player has chosen to do either of these, or nothing, then the option moves to the rightmost card again (or stepping left if the first player elected not to move his card or could not legally do so). Note that a rightmost player who was previously "frozen" due to lack of openings may be "opened" by a subsequent player's decision, which means that the Accordion process does not always move in simple right-to-left lock-step. Always check the rightmost card to see whether it is eligible to move, and if its player wants to move it.

Design notes: This section is just begging for playing-card diagrams.

Example 1: Ten of spades, Queen of clubs, Ace of diamonds, Queen of spades, Jack of diamonds

- King has "no shot"
- No covering is possible; action proceeds from left to right

Example 2: Queen of clubs, King of clubs, Jack of spades, Jack of hearts, Ten of diamonds

- Ace has "no shot"
- Ten of diamonds cannot move; it is guaranteed the final action of the layout
- Jack of hearts may cover Jack of spades
- King of clubs may cover Queen of clubs (does not affect or depend on Jack of hearts' choice)

Example 3: Ten of diamonds, Ace of spades, Queen of hearts, Ace of hearts, Ten of spades

- Jack and King have "no shot"
- Ten of spades may cover the Ace of spades. It may then move to cover the Ten of diamonds.
- Ace of hearts may move to cover the Queen of hearts. If the Ace of spades is open (based on Ten's actions), Ace of hearts may then move to cover it.

Example 4: King of diamonds, Ace of diamonds, Ten of diamonds, Jack of spades, Queen of Hearts

- Queen of hearts cannot move; it is guaranteed the final action of the layout
- Jack of spades cannot move; it is guaranteed the second-to-last action of the layout
- Ten of diamonds may cover Ace of Diamonds; if it does, then Ace of diamonds cannot move, but if it doesn't, then Ace of diamonds may cover King of diamonds
- Ten of diamonds may cover Ace of diamonds then move to cover King of diamonds; if it does, then the Ace of diamonds is now free to cover Ten of diamonds, itself covering King of diamonds

Example 5: Ace of diamonds, Ace of spades, Queen of spades, Jack of diamonds, Queen of hearts

- King and Ten have "no shot"
- Queen of hearts has no first move (but wait)
- Jack of diamonds may cover Ace of diamonds
- If it does, then Queen of hearts may cover Queen of spades; if it does, then the Queen of spades is then stalled, but if it doesn't, then Queen of spades may then cover Ace of spades
- If Jack of diamonds does not cover Ace of diamonds, then Queen of spades may cover Ace of spades
- If it does, then Ace of spades is stalled; if it doesn't, then Ace of spades may cover Ace of diamonds

Flashpoint narration

After all accordionizing is over, narration of actions proceeds from left to right, with covered cards preceding their coverers (i.e. top-down per column). If more than one card of a given rank remains in the layout, whether covered nor uncovered, then that player has the corresponding number of actions, or rather conflict resolutions, in the order as dictated by the cards.

Here's what a player-character or an NPC represented by the GM can do, when the real person's turn to speak arrives.

- A target character may be injured, killed if he or she is already injured, killed if he or she is in a position to be killed easily, bargained with successfully, made sympathetic to the acting character for this scene's resolution, avoided, or escaped from. The target character cannot have his or her loyalties permanently altered unless previous scenes have made him or her sympathetic to the acting character at least once.
- Other player-characters are treated just like NPCs as far as their target status goes, except that their sympathies and deep loyalties are under the full control of their owning players; changes to these things are subject to the owning players' approval and role-playing, and may be revised later as they see fit.
- Typically, a character is not able to bring about actions which affect large groups or areas, although some circumstances may permit it.
- The only constraint on actions' scope and effect is set by the group's agreement about the in-game-world logistics, with the final authority resting with the GM.

If a card covers a card of its own rank, then the player may effectively double the scope of the stated action, including an "injured-to-killed" combination or similar. If a card covers a card of another rank (i.e. another player's), then the covering player may assist or hinder the action stated by the covered player. Assisting means effectively doubling the scope, and hindering is considered to stifle the covered-player's action either partially or completely as the covering player sees fit. The covering player may also injure or even kill the covered character as part of this narration.

No narration or finalized action is stated prior to the card layout. In other words, if you decide to cover another player's card, you must wait until they narrate in order to decide whether to hinder or help. Nor is anyone obliged to announce whether they're helping or hindering when they cover another person's card.

If no card of a given rank is present in the layout, then that player-character is effectively drummed out of acting effectively during this flashpoint. This is called "no shot," in reference to the scenes in action movies where a sniper on the good-guy's side is supposed to drop the bad guy, but the prostitute or whoever coincidentally steps between the villain and the window at that moment, so the sniper, frustrated, barks into his microphone, "No shot! No shot!"

The "no shot" player states why and how that occurred whenever he or she sees fit during the process of resolution: before, between, or after the others' turns, but not during. Note that the GM may potentially have "no shot" as likely as any single player. The "no shot"

narration opportunities are quite broad, although they do not include resolving the adversity in terms of the conflict at hand. The character may, for instance, escape or avoid the situation (usually by being removed suddenly), or he or she might be captured and placed into a new situation. But the whole point is that a "no shot" resolution cannot remove or alter the present adversity, only delay it and possibly change its context. Other narrations tend to remove or alter the present adversity drastically.

Design note: One interesting way to keep "no-shot" situations from stalling out is to get your player-character into other player-characters' proximity and scenes, so that those players might include aspects of your conflict into their resolutions.

At the end of the flashpoint, the final outcomes of each scene are the GM's business, beyond the scope of the players' narrations. In other words, how the NPCs react in the long term, how other NPCs react to the events when they learn about them, how various physical objects are affected in the long-term, and so on, are all just grist for the GM's mill in developing the adversity that will eventually lead to the next flashpoint..

Typically, a layout ends with no Jokers appearing. In this case, after all narration is concluded, recombine all of the cards, re-shuffle thoroughly, and await the next flashpoint.

Design notes: I am really looking forward to trying this out. I had a terrible time GMing The Window and similar games, because again and again, I had to make HEE-rulings that effectively determined the outcome of a given scene (are the assassins outflanking the player-character, or aren't they?), and I'd like to see the decisions about covering affect the nature of the narrated actions - especially because, when covered and when narrating, you don't know whether the other player will help or hinder you.

A key issue, though, is the number of players. Clearly, the more players involved, (a) the less often the GM's input will enter layout resolutions, (b) the more frequent "no shots" become, (c) the less likely Jokers are to appear, and (d) the less likely duplicate cards will show up in a layout. I currently think that routinely altering the number of cards in a layout (from the base five) is a very bad idea, and so the only "solution" is to recognize that these effects will accompany play.

The Ace also presents an interesting problem - as written, the GM's ability to influence the entire game is only as extensive as that of a single player; the difference is that the GM may act across multiple scenes at once. I am uncertain whether to let a single Ace represent a single GM-action just as for a player, or whether to let it permit the GM to act once for all scenes in the current flashpoint. The former seems easier but too limited; the latter returns the GM to "GM-ness" but seems cumbersome. On the other hand, the GM does play the NPCs' motions and statements at all times, even during others' narrations.

Is this system Drama or Fortune? Both. I've usually seen the following

combinations in RPG design:

- **Organized IIEE + Fortune resolution per action**
- **No IIEE + Fortune resolution per action**
- **No IIEE + Drama resolution per action**

... but very little Organized IIEE + Drama resolution, in combination with preserving a central GM-role. I was pretty heavily influenced by the card game *Once Upon a Time*. I've also tried to preserve the emphasis found in (e.g.) *Theatrix* and *Universalis* that "My guy shoots him" is governed by pure player authority, when the player has that privilege.

Joker rules

1. If a Joker appears as the first card of the layout, the layout is cancelled and the GM narrates circumstances that effectively stifle everyone's ability to act, usually putting all the player-characters in a worse position than they were before. By "worse," I mean significantly worse than, for instance, "no shot" outcomes. Place the Joker on the bottom of the deck and do not re-shuffle; use the current deck for the next layout, which must be preceded by further play and a new flashpoint.

2. If a Joker appears elsewhere in the layout, stop the layout immediately and proceed as normal with the 1-4 cards present. Furthermore, when that is concluded, leave these cards on the table and do not re-shuffle the deck. For the flashpoint, put down five cards in a full layout to the right of the Joker, and proceed as normal using all the cards on the table. In any layout, a Joker may neither move nor be covered, but it does hold its place for purposes of a card covering another three places to its left.

Example 1: Ten of hearts, Ten of clubs, Ace of spades, Joker

- Jack, Queen, and King have "no shot"
- The Ten of clubs may cover the Ten of hearts
- Do not re-shuffle; leave these cards as they lie

Example 2: Ten of hearts, Ten of clubs, Ace of spades, Joker, Jack of hearts, King of hearts, Joker

- Three cards have been added to the layout to the right of the old Joker
- Queen has "no shot"
- King of hearts may cover Jack of hearts
- The Ten of clubs may or may not be covering the Ten of hearts, depending on what the player chose to do last time
- Do not re-shuffle; leave these cards as they lie

Example 3: Ten of hearts, Ten of clubs, Ace of spades, Joker, Jack of hearts, King of hearts, Joker, Jack of spades, Jack of diamonds, Ace of clubs, King of spades, 10 of diamonds

- Five cards have been added to the layout to the right of the old Joker
- Queen *still* has "no shot" (bad luck!)
- Ten of diamonds may cover Jack of diamonds
- King of spades may cover Jack of spades
- If neither of the above two occur, then Jack of spades may cover Jack of

- hearts, if the King of hearts did not do so in the previous flashpoint resolution
- After resolution, re-shuffle all of the cards

Design notes: Why the Joker rules? Because I feared a certain amount of sameness might creep in, flashpoint after flashpoint, and I want a given flashpoint possibly to be shorter or longer than the usual. The second rule represents both (1) occasional flashpoints that have a larger total number of actions than normal, as well as (2) providing the lucky cards that precede the Joker a disproportionately higher number of actions across the previous and current flashpoint. Why do I want that? Good question. I want to playtest it to see if it counteracts the chance for a person to be stuck with "no shot" too often.

Reward system

Remember the Wrongdoings? The GM has read them all, but doesn't know who has which one. The players have kept them all secret from one another.

At any time during a player-character's action, whether during the Flashpoint or not, the player may inform the other people that his character's action is a hint regarding the Wrongdoing. This announcement may only be made in reference to a character's *action*, never to what he or she *says*. After that announcement, the other players may guess the character's Wrongdoing. Only one person may guess at a time, and if they are wrong, then that character cannot receive another guess until the player provides another hint. Keep track of how many guesses have been made.

At any time, player may have the character disclose the Wrongdoing to another character, in which case the character's player (GM or non-GM) does indeed learn the Wrongdoing. The only constraint on this act is that the (imaginary) characters must be able to have such a conversation, in-game. The information exchange is private between those two (real) people. From that point, the second participant may also drop hints as to the Wrongdoing, following the same rules as the player and, if necessary, designating which character the hint concerns.

Conceivably, if everyone were to do this toward everyone else in the game, then guessing is completely obviated and won't enter play. That is perfectly all right, if it's what people want. A character whose Wrongdoing is known to all the other participants in play is treated exactly as if someone had guessed it.

After a successful guess, or upon full disclosure (considered to be the same thing), now turn to the cards which are not being used in flashpoint resolution. They include the 2-9 for each suit, possibly the Ten as well. From that point onward, at the end of every flashpoint, a player whose character's Wrongdoing is known to all participants draws a number of cards from this deck equal to the number of hints he had dropped previously. The minimum draw is one card (conceivably, someone might have swung straight into disclosure and never hinted). The GM must now take all of the following into account, regarding one NPC listed on that character's sheet per card:

- Odd is negative, reduced, or harmful; even is positive, increased, or beneficial
- Hearts concern relationships and emotions
- Diamonds concern wealth in any form

- Spades concern power over others
- Clubs concern safety and escape

Which cards go with which NPCs is up to the GM, as well as whether the stated phenomenon is certain or merely an opportunity. All of this information should be immediately worked into the events of role-playing through the course of events which will determine the next flashpoint.

Design notes: Obviously, what I've done here is taken the Secrets from Soap and reversed them - instead of becoming more vulnerable to being killed (losing) when one's Secret is known, the character becomes eligible for the climactic transformation all of play has been driving toward. I like the way that the guessing is now based on the player potentially trying to get the Wrongdoing's content across, rather than trying to hide it as occasionally happens in Soap.

What the guessed Wrongdoing does *not* do: affect the character's effectiveness in any way, provide different narration rights to the player, or permit specific behavioral options that weren't previously available. I'm specifically avoiding all of these sorts of rewards for this game.

I also confess that I am addicted to reward systems with some kind of mechanics-based uncertainty, especially when morals are concerned. It suits my enjoyment of system-based constraints, and I also like the idea of a "my guy my way" Drama-open resolution system running alongside a rather Fortune-heavy, highly player-on-player reward system.

Final confession: I made this part of the game up in a very seat-of-pants fashion, without a whole lot of consideration of probabilities and so forth. If someone else has an alternate suggestion for how Wrongdoings, the remaining deck, and participant interactions might work better, I'd love to hear about it. At the moment, I kind of like the way the GM gets a little help from the cards in terms of what's happening to whom; I find this sort of play exhausting to GM and often appreciate a little assistance from the system.

The outcome I'm looking for

It's pretty much a Blood Opera, but based more upon the players' judgements upon the characters rather than on the characters' own goals and conflicts among one another, although those may certainly come into the picture as well.

I had to fight against my own tastes throughout the design, in that I tried to avoid an overt Endgame status for characters or any sort of imposed story-structure based on mechanics' interactions. Unfortunately, I lost that fight a little bit when it comes to the reward system, although I (a) prevented it from directly affecting the characters' fates, (b) prevented it from constraining what the character was now permitted or not permitted to do, and (c) kept Force out of it entirely.