

Pyramid Reloaded

This is a Fate paper on visually explaining the skill pyramid concept, in particular looking for a method that makes it easier to place in front of players who are new to the idea of the pyramid, or who are having trouble wrapping their heads around it.

This write-up also proposes a revision of the phase-by-phase skill selection process that will have at least a minor impact on the way that skill pyramids look from phase to phase — don't expect this to completely jive with the online pyramid generators at certain points, because it won't. The proposition here is in the interests of speeding up the entire skill process, making it easier to do super-fast character creation as well as continue to support the spirit of the traditional phase-by-phase approach.

I'm Impatient — What's Changing?

- Select likely skills phase by phase, if you're doing phase by phase character creation, but don't spend points on them.
- Skill points all get spent at the end, on the skills you put in your pool during the phase by phase part.
- Pyramid is still necessary, but the phase-boundary no longer exerts pressure on the later pyramid, so higher rated skills start coming in slightly earlier in some cases.
- In order to accommodate this new method, when gaining skill levels as part of advancement, you're no longer forced to spend them when you cross another phase-boundary: you can now hoard skill points and save up for some higher skills to buy outright, rather than doing a bit-by-bit promotion, so long as you continue to have a pyramid that supports it.

That's all you get. If you need more, you'll have to actually read the damn thing.

Character Creation Overview

Character creation progresses in phases. Each phase is tied to a background story for your character. As you and your GM consider what the story means for your character's sheet, you'll determine the following:

- What aspect (or aspects, in an aspect-heavy game) does the character gain from this

experience?

- Which three to five skills from the skill list might have been affected by the experience in the story?

Write both of these things down for each phase, but don't worry about coming up with ratings for those skills yet. If you have a photocopy of your entire skill list handy, you may find it easiest to put a check-mark next to each skill, since, once you're done stepping through the phases, you'll want to put together a unified list of the skills touched by your stories.

Buying Skills

Once you're done with stepping through all the phases, it's time to move on to spending points on skills for your character. You get four skill points to spend for every phase your character went through, so a 5-phase character is going to have 20 skill points to spend.

Assuming you didn't miss any key skills that might have been touched by your background stories, you should limit yourself to spending skill points only on those skills. It's potentially likely that you'll only spend skill points on *some* of the skills you've indicated — don't feel like you *must* spend points on all the ones you check-marked.

When you're buying skills, skills cost one for each level increase above Mediocre (the default). Thus, the cost to buy a skill at Good, three up from Mediocre, is 3 skill points.

Skill Level	Cost
Legendary	7 points
Epic	6 points
Superb	5 points
Great	4 points
Good	3 points
Fair	2 points
Average	1 point

There is a limitation, however. There must always be one more skill the next step down than there is on the step above it. Therefore, if someone has two Fair skills, there must be three Average skills to support those.

In general, this is intended to represent the idea that a lot of topics get explored as you learn a specialty, but it does mean that occasionally the "cause and effect" perspective on things will be

that learning Basketweaving made you better at Swordfighting. Don't put too much stock in looking at this as a cause and effect thing. That said, the school of cinema teaches us that getting good at Carwashing makes you better at Kung Fu, so maybe we're on to something here.

At any rate, the resulting formation this lends your skills is called the "skill pyramid", and it can be one of the harder parts of the game to wrap your head around. The good news is, once you get past this, it's all smooth sailing. If it hasn't clicked for you yet, don't worry. We've got pictures.

Building a Skill Pyramid

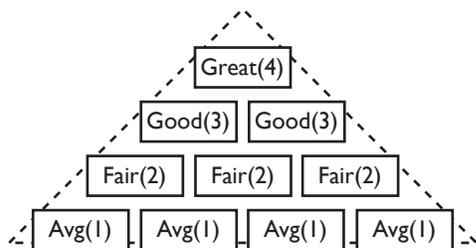
Think of each skill as a brick that you're using to build your character. The top of the pyramid, its peak, is where your character's focused specialties stand out, with ratings that make those "peak skills" the primary way your character makes its mark on the world — from far away, the peak is what people see about what you can do.

At five phases, you've got 20 skill points. As it happens, the highest single skill you can buy on that budget and support with a pyramid is a Great. It breaks down like this:

1 Great	1 x 4 points	4 points
2 Good	2 x 3 points	6 points
3 Fair	3 x 2 points	6 points
4 Average	4 x 1 point	4 points

Total: 10 skills for 20 points

To understand why this would be called a pyramid, look at it this way:



If you visualize the pyramid in this fashion, it'll be clear why you can't take away one of the lower-rated "bricks" — that would make the whole structure above it unstable.

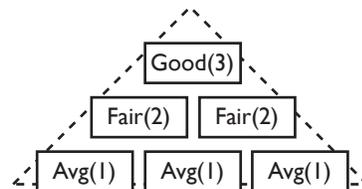
At this point, you may have figured out that you aren't *obligated* to go for the Great — maybe you want to spend points on more than ten skills. This will give you a thicker base to a pyramid that doesn't yet have a peak on it (we'll show you this shortly).

Still with a budget of 20 skill points, let's decide that the highest we really need to go is Good on a few of our skills, one step down from the highest we can go with 20 anyway. To support a good, we'd have this breakdown:

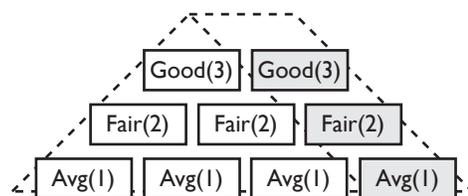
1 Good	1 x 3 points	3 points
2 Fair	2 x 2 points	4 points
3 Average	3 x 1 point	3 points

Total: 6 skills for 10 points

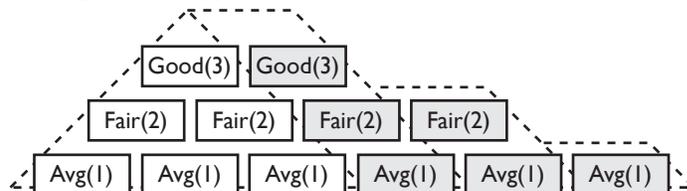
That leaves us ten points over, after spending our first ten on our "core" (meaning, supported with the minimum necessary lower skills) Good pyramid:



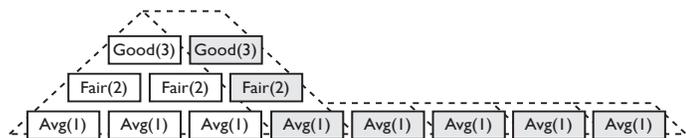
Since we already have one Good supported after spending ten points, adding another Good to the pyramid will only require adding one more supporting brick at each level down, so we'd only need to buy one more Fair and one more Average to support the additional Good. That's 3 for the good, 2 for the Fair, and 1 for the Average, or 6 points, leaving us four over. Adding a chain of single skills like this to a pyramid is called "thickening". Our once-thickened pyramid, costing 16 points at this point, looks like this:



We couldn't add a third Good at this point, since we know that a Good "thickener" costs a total of 6 points. A Fair "thickener" costs three (1 Fair + 1 Average for 3 points), leaving us one point for spare Average, and a pyramid that looks like this:



Or we could simply spend all four points on four Averages:



As a piece of friendly advice, it's usually a good idea to build out your pyramid first without worrying about what skills go where, and then "slot in" the skills after you've built the structure.

Speed Pyramidding

Now that you've got the idea what we mean when we say "core pyramid" and "thickener", you can start building pyramids extra-fast with this handy-dandy bit of mathematical shorthand. First, the tables.

Core Pyramid	Total Cost	Gets You
Legendary	84 points	1 Legendary, 2 Epic, 3 Superb, 4 Great, 5 Good, 6 Fair, 7 Average (28 skills)
Epic	56 points	1 Epic, 2 Superb, 3 Great, 4 Good, 5 Fair, 6 Average (21 skills)
Superb	35 points	1 Superb, 2 Great, 3 Good, 4 Fair, 5 Average (15 skills)
Great	20 points	1 Great, 2 Good, 3 Fair, 4 Average (10 skills)
Good	10 points	1 Good, 2 Fair, 3 Average (6 skills)
Fair	4 points	1 Fair, 2 Average (3 skills)
Average	1 point	1 Average (1 skill)

Thickener	Adds Cost	Gets You
Legendary	28 points	1 Legendary, 1 Epic, 1 Superb, 1 Great, 1 Good, 1 Fair, 1 Average (7 skills)
Epic	21 points	1 Epic, 1 Superb, 1 Great, 1 Good, 1 Fair, 1 Average (6 skills)
Superb	15 points	1 Superb, 1 Great, 1 Good, 1 Fair, 1 Average (5 skills)
Great	10 points	1 Great, 1 Good, 1 Fair, 1 Average (4 skills)
Good	6 points	1 Good, 1 Fair, 1 Average (3 skills)
Fair	3 points	1 Fair, 1 Average (2 skills)
Average	1 point	1 Average (1 skill)

Using these tables, you can very quickly construct an optimized pyramid:

- Determine the highest skill rating you want to have, that is has a Core Pyramid cost less than the number of skill points you have to spend. Buy that core pyramid, deduct the cost.
- The biggest thickener you can buy from here on can start no higher than the peak of your core pyramid, and must have a cost less than or equal to the points you have left. Lather, rinse, repeat, until you have no points left.

Example. Lydia is creating a quick, eleven-phase character. She picks eleven aspects for him and quickly determines a likely list of skills. With eleven phases, she has 44 points to spend.

Looking at the Core Pyramid table, she sees that the most 44 points can afford is a Superb core pyramid. That costs her 35 points, and leaves her with 9. She writes down that she has 1 Superb, 2 Great, 3 Good, 4 Fair, and 5 Average.

Now she moves on to buying thickeners. The biggest thickener she can afford with 9 points is a Good, for 6, leaving her with 3 points. She adds 1 Good, 1 Fair, and 1 Average to her pool.

With 3 points left, she can afford a Fair thickener exactly, which she buys, adding 1 Fair and 1 Average to her pool.

Her totals are 1 Superb, 2 Great, 4 Good, 6 Fair, and 7 Average, an optimally constructed pyramid of 20 skills for 44 points. She places skills from her pool into the pyramid, starting at the top with the one she considers most important for the character, and moving on down from there.

Creating a less-than-optimized pyramid is just as fast — all you have to do is pick thickeners that are well under your remaining budget.

Example. Lydia is creating a quick, 6-phase character that she wants to give a broad skill-base. She decides to do this by buying one down from the most expensive core pyramid she can buy. With 6 phases, she has 24 skill points to spend.

For her core pyramid, she could buy a Great one for 20, but she decides to step one down and buy a Good one for 10. This leaves her 14 points and gives her 1 Good, 2 Fair, and 3 Average.

Since she's starting with a Good core, she can't buy more than a Good thickener. 2 Good thickeners at 6 points each costs 12 of her 14 points, adding 2 Good,

2 Fair, and 2 Average. With her remaining 2 points, she can only buy 2 more Average skills.

Her totals are 3 Good, 4 Fair, and 7 Average — 14 skills and a solid spread. If she'd gone for optimized, she'd have 1 Great, 2 Good, 4 Fair, and 6 Average — one less skill. If she'd bought lower on her thickeners, she could have gotten 4 Fair thickeners instead of the 2 Good ones, and would have had 1 Good, 6 Fair, and 9 Average, 16 skills — 2 more skills.

Handling Advancement

Advancement will occasionally involve the awarding of skill levels. With the older method of phase-by-phase pyramid construction carried forward into advancement, this could get super-awkward with skill point expenditures being forced every time you got a “phase’s worth” of skill points.

So, first off, we throw out the idea that you should be forced to spend skill points, ever. Want to hoard up 7 of them and spend them all at once? Go right ahead. But there’s more to adjust with the advancement process than just allowing hoarding.

The “Pyramid Reloaded” method encourages, implicitly at least, a new perspective on the pyramid — that it’s a bunch of slots which you can slide your skills (bricks) into. It’s good to make use of this new perspective when it comes to advancement, if you view it all as buying new slots.

The old method, and perspective, introduced quandaries such as, “if I spend a point to upgrade my Good Swordplay skill to a Great, I’ve left a gap down in the Goods that I now have to fill! Oh, woe!” But if we’re just buying slots, and can save up our points, we can buy new slots on the pyramid — the tables in Speed Pyramidding, above, will help on this — and slide some or all of our skills up, filling in any empty slots left with as yet untaken skills.

This is really what we were doing before, but it had the downside of feeling constrained, since we were focusing on spending 1 point on skill X, another on skill Y, and so on. If we focus on the slots first, and then figure out where the skills fit, we’ve made the “problem” a lot easier.

When buying new slots on our skill pyramid, there are several approaches we can use.

New Thickener. This is very straightforward: if you have the points to spend on a new thickener, and it doesn’t exceed the height of your core

pyramid, you can just buy it, outright. Use the table from “Speed Pyramidding”, above.

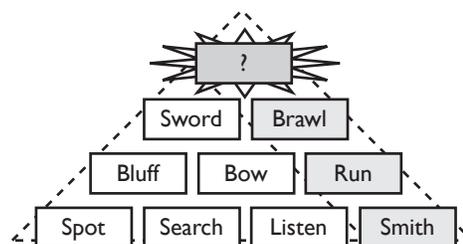
Upgrade Thickener. If you have a thickener that’s shorter than the height of your core pyramid (e.g., if you have a Good core pyramid with a Fair thickener attached to it), you can spend points equal to the cost of a single skill one higher than the thickener’s height, upgrading the thickener to that new height. This sounds more complicated than it is: to upgrade a Good thickener to a Great thickener, you spend the points it would cost to buy a single Great skill (4).

Upgrade Core Pyramid. If you have a thickener that’s the same height as your core pyramid, you can combine the two into a larger core pyramid by spending the points necessary to buy a single skill one higher than either piece. In other words, to upgrade a Good core pyramid, you’ll need a Good thickener to start. To combine the pyramid and the thickener into a larger core pyramid, spend four points to buy a single Great skill: you now have a Great core pyramid (and your thickener is no longer considered a thickener, since it’s part of it).

Once you’ve added a new slot or slots to your pyramid, you can use the opportunity to shuffle around where the skills are positioned on the pyramid. A good rule of thumb to use here is that no skill may be moved more than one ranking up or down on the pyramid at any given point of development — but it’s a rule you should feel free to break if there’s a decent reasoning behind the change.

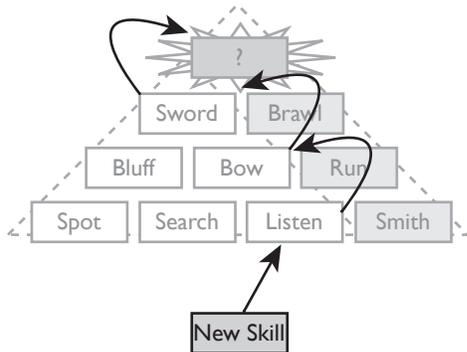
This is best explored by making use of an extended example.

Example. *Lydia has a character with a Good core pyramid and a Good thickener, for a total of nine skills. She has accumulated four skill points and wants to spend them all at once, to buy a Great slot on her pyramid, combining the Good core pyramid and Good thickener into a single Great core pyramid. With this decision made, she doesn’t have to worry about skill points for the rest of the process. The result looks something like this:*

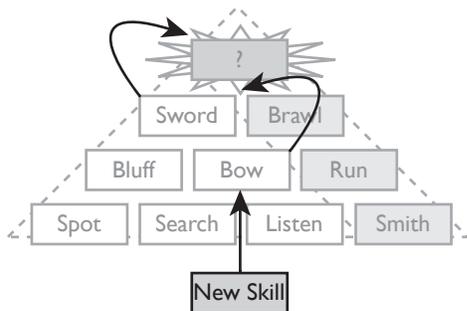


With a new slot added at the peak of her pyramid, she could simply add in a new skill there, at the Great peak, but that doesn't appeal to her for several reasons. For one, it doesn't seem organic to her (or her GM) that a new skill appear from out of nowhere at Great. As well, she'd like to use the opportunity to improve one or more of her already-existing skills.

Considering what she has already, one option could be to "cascade" several skills upward — she could take her Good Sword to Great, then her Fair Bow to Good, and her Average Listen to Fair, leaving Listen's slot open on the pyramid, to be filled by whatever new skill she decides to take.



Looking at this, she's not sure she really wants to upgrade her Listen skill; she rarely uses it and she's looking at a third combat skill as her new skill. So she could just slot the new skill into the space vacated at Fair by her Bow skill. While it does involve a new skill appearing at a position higher than Average in her pyramid, some accelerated development for a new skill does make sense for her combat-oriented character.



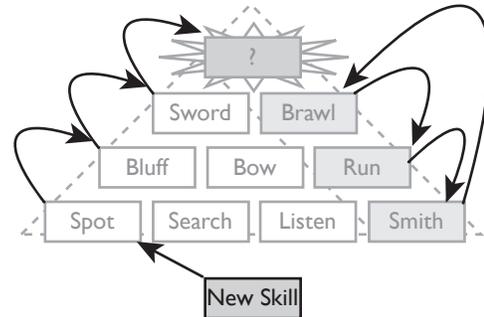
Since spending four skill points all at once represents a fairly significant developmental point for her character, Lydia could contemplate a more extensive shuffling of skills — the changes needn't be limited to filling in spaces vacated by skills as they ascend the pyramid.

For starters, she contemplates a cascade like before — Sword bumps to Great, Bluff bumps to Good, Spot bumps to Fair, and a new skill hops into Spot's Average space.

But she realizes as well that her character rarely uses

his fists — he has come to see the sword as the civilized way to settle disputes. Further, he's a stand-and-fight sort of guy, so he doesn't actually use his Run skill that much. She decides to drop those two skills — Brawl from Good to Fair, and Run from Fair to Average.

Now she needs to decide which of her lower skills can ascend to take Brawl's Good slot. She settles on Smith, on the idea that her character's adoption of the Sword as his primary manner of "relating" to his opponents also means he's taking a lot more time learning how to build the ideal sword.



Shuffling skills around the slots in your pyramid is a powerful technique for making the pyramid a lot easier to digest. Characters evolve; some skills fall out of favor for lack of practice, others improve with their use. When you can accept that your pyramid is just a stack of skill slots, you have a much more fluid model for development, while still retaining the advantages of a relatively math-light approach to capping skill growth.

How Official Is This?

Well, I'm an author of Fate, and I wrote this up all solo. So it's about as official as that.

The Legal Crap

This document is © Fred Hicks, 2004, but otherwise covered by whatever license currently covers Fate. At the time of this writing, Fate is covered under the Fudge license. If Fate gets released under an OGL license, this document is considered an extension of that work, and thus covered under that as well. Or someone can nudge me to update this document with an official OGL declaration. Bah.

Fate: Fantastic Adventures in Tabletop Entertainment™ is a trademark of Evil Hat Productions, yadda yadda.

Where It's Due

Credit in the main for this idea goes to Leonard "Landon Darkwood" Balsera, a good friend and one of my favorite sounding-boards for Fate ideas.

Beyond the inestimable Mr. Balsera, this document sure as hell wouldn't have happened without a lot of lively discussion on the Yahoo! discussion group. Thanks, guys.

Here Are Some Websites

<http://www.faterpg.com/>

<http://www.evihat.com/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/FateRPG>