

The Elements of the Game

In this article, we will be exploring the core elements of our FU-based games, **Equinox** (using the **Equinox Storygame Guide**) and **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend**. We will identify the thoughts behind the game design, going beyond the unique resolution mechanics that only *appear* to be at the center of it all.

When composing adventures in traditional roleplaying games, many gamemasters approach design from an event-centered point of view, trying to arrange events happening in the adventures into a pre-determined order. However, even with a few triggers and if/else combinations, the structure of adventures written this way is very rigid. Such a rigid structure makes it hard for the gamemaster to adapt the adventure to his players' needs, often leading to frustration when railroading them to his intended goal or shutting their ideas down until they have one that meet his line of thinking.

Sounds familiar? We have all been there at some point.

Adventure preparation in the **Equinox Storygame** and **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend** comes with a different approach in mind and was designed to produce more organic results. To translate this into an image, think of a plant growing in a simple pot. The seed of your plant represents you and your group, with the soil in the pot representing the setting in which you play in, and the pot representing the rules. The preparation of the game is what happens below the surface, and the actual gameplay coming out of it happens above. We like this example, because every group and every game is different (just like seeds and plants)—but the things you need to do to get results are virtually the same (gaming or gardening).

<<IMAGE: DRAWING OF THE PLANT WITH ANNOTATIONS>>

With that image in mind, let's start with the roots!

The Roots

The core elements of the game comprise three different roots, all of them equally important: the collaboratively designed **Stage**, the group's overall **Motivation**, and each character's **Drives**.

- **The Stage**

When preparing a game using the **Equinox Storygame** or **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend**, the first thing you do is **Setting the Stage**. You and your group design the background in which you will play together within the larger setting of the game world. Each aspect of the stage provides adventure hooks the gamemaster can pick up and build upon, while the players invest themselves into adding features to the stage they would like to see in the game.

- **Group Motivation**

The group's overall motivation sets down the basic theme of the game and gives direction to the adventures the group is going to play. A group of explorers sent out to the astral realms in order to find places to settle plays differently than a group of kaer-delvers searching the darkest caverns for treasure. A group haunted by a Horror or Demon, looking for a way to get rid of its curse, plays differently than a group of royal investigators paid to solve magical crimes or a squad of troubleshooters keeping the peace on a space station.

- **Character Drives**

Each character is designed with a central motivation in mind. By answering the four questions about your character (**Where do you come from?**, **What do you want?**, **What is stopping you?** and **What will you do?**), you define the basics of your character's story arc for the next few adventures. At some point down the road, you will have achieved your goals and fulfilled your Drives, and you will adopt new ones to continue playing.

The roots grow quickly and are woven tightly together—every element has an influence on the other two, which is exactly as intended! The resulting game is better and stronger because of this tight connection.

But wait—where is the story and where is the plot? Aren't these supposed to be core elements of the game too? Both the **Equinox Storygame** and **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend** are advertised as *storygames*, right?

That is correct, but not in the traditional manner. Right now you have a seeded and watered plant pot sitting in the sun, growing roots. At the point you and your group start playing, the actual plant emerges, representing the game itself.

The Plant

So the plot and the story are the result of all this and are constantly fed by the roots. The gamemaster (as well as the players) now ensure that the plant remains healthy and grows into the shape they collectively desire.

That said, when preparing a game for the **Equinox Storygame** and **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend**, the gamemaster doesn't focus on the events he wants to happen and how the story is resolved—he is actually forbidden to do this by the rules!

Instead, he focuses on the roots to find out what the players want their characters to do when chasing down their individual and mutual interests:

- The stage and the group formed by the players provides a theme and a common background—full of juicy hooks the gamemaster cannot ignore if he wants the players to continue working together towards a common goal. If this central theme isn't served and the characters cannot do what they are supposed to do, the players will eventually lose interest in the game.
- Each character is bringing his or her own story arc, filled with tasty story hooks the gamemaster must pick up in some form to keep the player invested in the game. Without the character progressing in his arc—being able to chase and eventually meet his personal goals—the player will soon get frustrated.
- The events that happen during the game provide more material upon which to build. These grow organically out of the running game and have an impact on the characters, the group, and the stage. Updating each of these roots continuously is what keeps the game fresh and healthy!

Preparing the game involves uniting all these things. The gamemaster adds new threats, locations, characters and adversaries, and so on—to throw in rocks and sticks in the characters' paths, making

each arc interesting and compelling to follow through. The plans of his villains naturally clash with the wants and needs of the group, posing a threat to the established stage.

It is completely legit (and sometimes outright necessary!) to let the players run into a pre-planned event or two to establish or maintain direction in the game. However, treat this like the gardening technique of pruning—overdo it and the plant will be damaged. Remember, your job is not to build a plant, but to grow one!

In essence, the gamemaster's moderation of the game boils down to creating scenes in which the players star, making sure each and every one of them is challenged and gets a chance to shine. As the gamemaster, you have the power to set the focus of each scene and use pacing to steer the game forward. While it is everyone's responsibility to prevent the game from grinding to a halt and becoming a lesson in boredom, the gamemaster is the one beating the drums.

The Pot

Finally, the game mechanics found in the **Equinox Storygame Guide** and **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend** serve as boundary for the game—the actual pot to complete our metaphor of roots, soil, and a plant. Pots come in many shapes and sizes, just like roleplaying game rules. But we won't be diving into full-blown examples comparing flower pots and game systems. Instead, we'll end by describing the underlying mindset of the rules:

The rules in the **Equinox Storygame Guide** and **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend** leave a lot of room for interpretation. The core resolution mechanic, the beat-the-odds roll, serves as the prime example, setting the tone for all other mechanics in the books. Setting up and interpreting the dice requires common sense as well as a good understanding of the workings of the game world. The same is true for every talent description, every spell description, and every piece of equipment and gear you find in the game. The need for interpretation is—as opposed to the more detailed rules in traditional roleplaying games—not a bug. It's a core feature of the game.

Why is that so? Wouldn't it be better to add more definitions so that everyone can play by the same rules? How does this support storytelling?

The ability to bend the rules and interpret them in a way that suits your group's tastes is the big advantage these games have over computer games and some of the more laboriously detailed traditional pen-and-paper roleplaying games. Instead of having to bend your collective imaginations to a hard-coded detail (for example, *"humans can move 10 meters per combat round, which is exactly six seconds long"*), you run with what is plausible for everyone at the table. Interpretation ensures the rules don't stand in the way.

Of course, this naturally leads to more discussions at the table. That's both good and bad: good because it deepens everyone's understanding of the game and setting, as well as shaping the tone of the game; bad because such discussions can consume precious game time.

There is a different perspective, however. Taking time to discuss the pros and cons of a task in a given situation is not always a bad thing, because it allows everyone to uncover circumstances that weren't entirely obvious right away. There is fun to be found in that, but the sweet spot is different in every group and situation.

The rules assume your group can achieve group consensus quickly and easily , and that you're able to identify your group's sweet spot without much trouble. The trick here is to find the right balance where everyone is comfortable with the play speed and the decisions made. If that is not the case, you can default to assign more power to the gamemaster—or some other “last word”-method with which everyone is comfortable.

Spell Matrices

One of the features of the **Earthdawn** setting is the magician's use of spell matrices, to protect them from the harmful magical energies and astral taint the Horror brought into the world. In the Step System, spell matrices mainly serve as a mechanic for restricting the number of spells a magician can cast safely. The simple rules in **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend** do not necessarily require restricting spells, so the use of spell matrices is implicit: there is no mechanical impact unless your story has actual demand for such detail.

Some of you still want spell matrices to be more prominent in their games, however, so the following optional rules add mechanical detail to all magician characters. They also change the way spells affect the narrative of your game.

Raw Magic

Casting spells without a spell matrix is no longer safe, but considered to be "raw magic"—the magician channels astral energy directly through his own pattern and shapes that energy into the spell he needs.

The upside is that casting spells this way doesn't require the magician to spend a Karma Point—raw magic is easier to cast. The downside of this is two-fold: the astral energy is damaging and attracts unwanted attention.

- Casting raw magic does not require spending a Karma Point. Adjusting parameters works as normal.
- When casting raw magic and rolling a *"No, and..."* or *"Yes, but..."* result, the magician receives a Condition based on the severity of the situation (the more powerful the spell used, the worse the Condition).
- The effect of casting a raw spell is equivalent to firing a brilliant flare on a dark night. Horrors and other magical beings may take notice and act accordingly. Because of this inherent danger, magicians generally resort to this method only in dire emergencies.

Matrix Casting

A spell matrix is a magical construct a magician attunes to form a single spell. Once attuned, the magician can cast the attuned spell more safely, because the matrix filters the astral energy and dampens the effect.

- A spell matrix must be attuned before use. This is either done automatically with a short ritual or on the fly by making a beating-the-odds roll. On a *"No, and..."* result, all of the magician's spell matrices are wiped (and need to be re-attuned before they can be used again).
- Once attuned, the spell a matrix carries can be cast safely over and over again. A spell matrix can only hold a single spell. Side-effects of a *"No, and..."* or *"Yes, but..."* result will only apply to the effect of the spell, but not to taint or the attraction of unwanted attention.
- Casting a spell through a spell matrix requires the spending of a Karma Point (as per the regular rules).

Number of Spell Matrices

A magician receives a number of spell matrices depending on his Circle of Mastery: Novice=2, Journeyman=3, Warden=4, Master=5.

Developing Spell Matrices

At certain Circles of Mastery, magicians can use Character Points expand the capabilities of their spell matrices. The following enhancements are compatible and can be combined. Each enhancement (*Enhanced, Armored, Shared*) is added as a Tag to the spell matrix in question.

- **Enhanced (2CP, Journeyman):** Spending a Karma Point while attuning the matrix allows you to adjust a parameter (as per p.136) and lock it into the matrix. Every subsequent casting of the spell starts with this parameter set as default, and can be adjusted further as normal.
- **Armored (2CP, Warden):** Like all entities, spell matrices can be attacked, disrupted, and damaged. An armored matrix is more resilient to such effects, making them more difficult to achieve.
- **Shared (3CP, Master):** A Shared Matrix can hold more than a single spell. It must be attuned by making a beating-the-odds roll, with each additional spell adding a penalty die. On a “No, and...” result, all of the magician's spell matrices are wiped (and need to be re-attuned before they can be used again).

Shamans [SIDEBAR]

Shamans store their spells in fetishes, physical objects representing the spell. A spell fetish works exactly like the spell matrices described above, but must be held in hand when the spell is cast. Spell fetishes can also be developed and carry the same enhancements as above. Losing a spell fetish is equivalent to a wiped spell matrix, requiring the magician to rebuild the object and attune it. Enhancements aren't lost; they apply to the new fetish.

Thread Magic

The magical energy flowing through the world of **Earthdawn** can be separated into strands called threads, and one of the unique applications of the workings of magic is the use of **thread magic**. Adepts can use thread magic to activate a Legendary Items' abilities, magicians use thread magic to supply the power needed for their spells, and groups use it to unite their fates for a common goal.

The rules in **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend** move the role of thread weaving into the fiction told at the table, there are no explicit rules governing threads and thread for the sake of simplicity—although you can still use the topic and build questions around it.

Patterns and Pattern Items [Sidebar]

Everything in the world of **Earthdawn** has a magical pattern. Patterns identify entities, places, or objects as unique individuals. While some patterns may share similarities (two dwarfs, for example), they are both unique. Each pattern represents only one specific person, place, or thing—everything that defines its existence from the moment of its creation up to the present moment is woven into its pattern.

Patterns grow in power and complexity when interacting with magic. If the magical interaction is significant enough, the pattern transforms and becomes magically important in the world. Such magic can be introduced deliberately using ritual magic, or accidentally by using of powerful magic nearby. Such patterns are called True Patterns, and they are usually Named.

People and places with True Patterns may become associated with items that reflect the knowledge stored in their patterns. Usually, these are personal possessions or items directly associated with the person or place. Such items are called Pattern Items.

True Patterns and Pattern Items are powerful, and can be studied and utilized for magical purposes—for good and for bad.

There is, however, an application of thread magic the rules don't cover: weaving threads to people, places, and things. To be able to use thread magic for this purpose, the following requirements must be fulfilled:

- The target has a True Pattern.
- The Character has direct access to the True Pattern or uses an associated a Pattern Item as conduit.
- The character has studied the person, place, or object to learn its Name, history, interactions with magic, or other related information. Studying a True Pattern directly is also possible if the character can astrally sense it.

To weave a thread, the player things up a suitable Tag to represent the thread he is about to weave. He must then spend a Karma Point and make a beat-the-odds roll. The question asked can be as simple as *"Can I weave a thread to [enter person, place, or object here]?"*.

Modifiers apply as usual, and depend on how powerful the Tag ism how well the character has studied, and other circumstances that may apply.

If successful, the player has woven a thread and can use the associated Tag whenever he is interacting with the target. The Tag lasts until the end of the Scene, but can be made permanent if the player spends a Character Point.

Breben is preparing to mount a defense for the villagers of in Harina's Bay, a mystic site that was once the stage for a battle between the legendary t'skrang pirate Harina and Morash, a corrupted water elemental defeated in the process. Breben has not recovered by Pattern Items of the bay, but spends time studying its True Pattern using his Astral Sight talent. He learns details of the battle fought between Harina and Morash, which he uses to weave a thread. He chooses the Tag Homeground, which is very broad and is intended to give him an advantage whenever he is in Harina's Bay. Because of this, he receives a penalty die to his role. However, since he has time to study the place and can examine the True Pattern directly, he also gains a bonus die. Breben also spends a CP to make the thread permanent, because he doesn't know when the attackers will arrive.

Threads can also be **unraveled** using similar circumstances (access to the True Pattern and/or a Pattern Item) or the Dispel Magic Spell (see **Earthdawn: The Age of Legend**, p.161). Permanent Threads are harder to unravel, and the disruption of the Dispel Magic spell is only temporary in nature.

Familiars

Besides their adventuring group, many adepts surround themselves with loyal animal companions. Familiars are most common with magician characters, but may serve adepts of any Discipline. Known as familiars, these creatures share a strong bond with their master—almost similar to the one between a Cavalryman and his mount. Those ties are sealed with a familiar oath, and infuse the familiar with the adept's magic and often with several other special abilities.

Finding a Familiar

You usually chose a familiar from the loyal creatures surrounding you already. As long as the creature is well-disposed toward you, there are only few exceptions to which ones can become familiars: Named spirits, dragons, Horrors, and other sapient creatures are not available (even though there are frightening rumors claiming otherwise). You must forge a respectful relationship with the creature, and it must have been your companion for a while before you can initiate the familiar ritual.

The Familiar Oath

The blood oath sworn to create the magical bond between you and the creature to become your familiar is sealed with blood. You, as the creature's patron, declare to aid and protect your familiar, to combine your strength and will forever. You can only bond with one familiar at a time. Establishing the bond costs Character Points (as shown on the table below) and requires you to take a Wound which can be healed normally.

Breaking the oath will inflict a magical—and visible—Wound on you that cannot be healed for a year and a day. During this time, you cannot swear another familiar oath.

Effects of the Bond

The familiar oath bestows a number of benefits on both you and the creature. Once completed, add the following abilities to the familiar's game statistics:

Blood Link: You can transfer Wounds and Conditions between yourself and your familiar while touching it, one for each Karma Point you spend on the transfer. This ability is intended for use in live-and-death situations: transferring minor injuries without being in imminent danger will break the familiar bond (as will killing the familiar in this manner).

Spirit Link: Both you and your familiar can sense the general feelings and location of each other, including if the other is in danger. You must spend a Karma Point to activate this ability.

Pattern Link: The familiar's magical pattern is connected to yours, allowing you to improve its abilities. However, this also enables others to exploit that link and weave threads to it (see [Thread Magic](#)). This link between the magical patterns remains even after the familiar oath uniting you and your familiar has expired.

Familiar Advancement

You can now invest Character Points to improve your familiar's abilities and game statistics. The **Familiar CP Costs** table below lists the available options.

Familiar CP Costs

Entering the Familiar Oath: 3 CP

Adding or altering a Tag: 1 CP

Adding a new special ability: 3 CP

Increasing the Threat Circle: 5 CP (Journeyman), 8 CP (Warden), 13 CP (Master)

Adding a Wound Slot: 4 CP*

Turning the Familiar into a Spell Matrix: 4 CP**

* Once per Threat Circle

** If you use the optional Spell Matrix rules

Adding or Altering a Tag

You can change one of the familiar's Tags or add a new one between game sessions. This change should relate in some way to the experiences and story in which the familiar has participated.

Adding new Special Abilities

Due to the magic bestowed on them, as well as the experiences they face, familiars can develop new special abilities over time. There are no hard and fast rules as to what these abilities include. Draw inspiration from the existing abilities in the **Creatures & Adversaries** chapter (p.XX, Earthdawn: The Age of Legend), or base them on a talent or spell effect. Discuss the new ability in the group to make sure they fit into your collective vision of the game.

Increasing the Threat Circle

Training your familiar to become stronger and more dangerous will allow you to increase its Thread Rating. This option is quite expensive, and requires ample training times. Again, discuss this change in the group to make sure they fit into your collective vision of the game.

Adding a Wound Slot

Hardening your creature for battle and against abuse will allow you to add further Wound Slots to its game statistics. This can only be done once per Threat Circle.

Turning the Familiar into a Spell Matrix

Magician frequently use their familiars to serve as additional spell matrix. Of course, this only makes sense if you use the optional Spell Matrix rules in your games.