

Manifold

Game Master Manual

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1 Introduction to Manifold

1.0.1 What This Is, How It Works, and What It Asks of You

Manifold is not a traditional tabletop role-playing game.

It does not ask you to learn a ruleset, master mechanics, or optimize characters.

It asks you to **participate in the evolution of a world** through shared reasoning, improvisation,

and consequence-aware play.

This document exists to align expectations before you read anything else.

1.1 Manifold Is a Shared Cognitive System

In Manifold, **the cognitive load of running the game is shared.**

The GM does not “run the world” alone.

The players do not act blindly against hidden systems.

The world evolves through **visible state**, **open discussion**, and **collective judgment**.

Most information in Manifold is: - Public - Shared - Actively tracked at the table

Only a small portion of information is private to the GM, and even that exists solely to preserve uncertainty—not authority.

If a situation becomes complex, ambiguous, or difficult to resolve, the correct response is not to decide in isolation.

The correct response is to talk it through.

Conversation is not a failure mode in Manifold.

It is the resolution process.

1.2 The GM Is a Facilitator, Not a Controller

The GM in Manifold does not: - Compete with the players - Secretly determine outcomes - Enforce hidden rules - “Protect” the story

Instead, the GM: - Maintains continuity of world state - Manages visibility and scope - Helps the table reason about consequences - Facilitates the world’s evolution over time

The world is not driven by the GM’s plans.

It is driven by **state**, **pressure**, and **what the table does next**.

If the GM does not know how a three-way interaction under pressure should resolve, that is not a problem.

That is an invitation to reason together.

1.3 There Is No Hidden Ruleset

Manifold has no action economy, no stat math, no ability lists, and no optimization paths.

What exists instead: - Characters defined by **capability and constraint** - A world that remembers what happens - Pressure that accumulates over time - Instability that emerges when things are pushed too far - Dice used only to sample uncertainty—not to grant permission

Because of this, **new players often learn Manifold faster than experienced ones.**

There are no “wrong builds.” There are no system mastery traps. There is nothing to min-max.

If you can describe what your character wants and how they attempt it, you already know how to play.

1.4 Improvisation and Storytelling Are the Core Skills

The primary requirement for playing Manifold is not rules knowledge.

It is: - Willingness to improvise - Comfort reacting honestly to change - Interest in shared storytelling
- Acceptance that control is not guaranteed

If you have ever: - Improvised a character in a story - Participated in collaborative fiction - Played theater or narrative games - Enjoyed consequences that reshape the situation

You are already prepared for Manifold.

1.5 Dice Do Less — and That’s Intentional

Dice in Manifold are not the engine of the game.

They do not decide: - What you are allowed to attempt - Whether your character is competent - Whether the GM approves of your action

Dice are used sparingly, and only when: - Intent is clear - Multiple outcomes are genuinely possible
- The difference between those outcomes matters

When dice appear, they are a **shared tool**, rolled openly, to help select between already-understood possibilities.

1.6 What Manifold Expects from the Table

Manifold assumes: - Good-faith play - Open communication - Shared responsibility for understanding the world - Willingness to discuss uncertainty instead of hiding it

It does **not** assume: - Perfect GM foresight - Mechanical enforcement of fairness - Adversarial play - Optimized decision-making

Manifold works best when everyone at the table understands that they are not trying to “win” — they are trying to **see what happens next**.

1.7 If This Sounds Appealing

Then continue.

- The **Player Guide** explains how to engage with the world.
- The **GM Manual** explains how to facilitate its evolution.
- The **World Building Guide** explains how to construct worlds that sustain meaningful pressure and change.

Each document builds on this foundation.

If this framing does *not* appeal to you, that’s okay too.

Manifold is intentionally specific about the kind of play it supports.

1.7.1 Final Note

Manifold does not remove responsibility from the table.

It distributes it.

And when everyone participates in that responsibility, the game becomes lighter, not heavier.

2 Act I – Chapter I: What You Are Doing Here

This chapter establishes the *role* you are taking on when you run Manifold. It is not about rules, procedures, or preparation. It is about orientation.

If you read only one chapter before running your first session, read this one.

For a full example fantasy game implementation, see the World Building Guide.

2.1 You Are Not Running a Contest

Manifold is not a game where the GM tests the players.

You are not: - Setting challenges for the players to overcome - Measuring their performance -
Deciding whether they succeed or fail - Playing the world *against* them

There is no hidden difficulty to tune and no balance to protect.

If you approach this game as a contest, you will do more work than necessary and the system will fight you.

2.2 You Are Curating a Living World

Your role is to **curate a world that already exists**, with or without the players.

That means: - The world has conditions before the players act - Those conditions change as a result of action or neglect - Pressure accumulates whether it is addressed or not - Consequences persist beyond the scene that created them

You are not responsible for creating a story arc.

You are responsible for: - Establishing initial conditions - Expressing how the world responds - Preserving causal continuity

Stories emerge from interaction with that world.

2.3 The World Applies Pressure — Not Opposition

In Manifold, the world does not *try to win*.

Instead, it applies **pressure**: - Environmental limits - Social tension - Physical strain - Emotional stress - Unresolved instability

Pressure does not block action outright.

It **shapes what happens when action is taken**.

When things go badly, it is not because the world opposed the players harder. It is because pressure had already been building.

This distinction matters. It keeps outcomes traceable and play cooperative.

2.4 Dice Do Not Decide Success or Failure

Dice are not referees.

They do not: - Grant permission - Judge intent - Decide whether an action “works”

Before any dice are rolled, it should already be clear: - What is possible - What is impossible - What tradeoffs exist

Dice are used only to sample *which of the already-possible outcomes occurs*.

If an action would succeed cleanly, no dice are needed. If an action cannot work, no dice are needed.

This is not leniency. It is clarity.

2.5 Judgment Is Required — and Supported

Manifold relies on your judgment.

This is intentional.

You will regularly decide: - Whether an action is feasible - Whether uncertainty is meaningful - How pressure shapes an outcome

You are not expected to memorize rules or reference tables.

The system exists to: - Give your judgment structure - Make consequences consistent - Share cognitive load with the table

If you are unsure, you are doing it right. The game assumes discussion, not certainty.

2.6 What This Means at the Table

When you run Manifold:

- You describe the world honestly
- Players describe what they attempt and why it should work
- The table agrees on what is at stake
- Outcomes change the state of the world

You are not carrying the game alone.

Reasoning, interpretation, and storytelling are shared responsibilities.

2.7 If You Are an Experienced GM

You may recognize parts of this approach.

If you are coming from a system built around: - Encounter balance - Difficulty classes - Opposed rolls - Turn-by-turn optimization

You will need to let those habits go.

This game will ask less of you procedurally, and more of you *honestly*.

That is not a burden. It is a relief.

2.8 Take This With You

Before moving on, hold onto these ideas:

- You are curating state, not judging performance

- The world applies pressure; it does not compete
- Dice sample uncertainty; they do not decide success
- Judgment is shared and supported

Everything else in the manual builds on this foundation.

*Next: Act I – Chapter II introduces what this game is **not**, and why those exclusions matter.*

3 Preface – Is This Game for You?

Read this before committing time to learning or running Manifold.

Manifold is not designed to be everything for everyone. It is designed to do a very specific set of things **well**.

This preface exists to help you decide—**honestly and early**—whether Manifold is a good fit for you and your table.

Nothing in this section teaches you how to run the game. Its purpose is alignment, not instruction. If what follows sounds unappealing, you should feel comfortable stopping here.

3.1 Manifold May Be for You If...

3.1.1 You want a living world, not a scripted plot

Manifold assumes that the world exists independently of the player characters.

- Events progress even if the party ignores them
- Problems do not pause waiting for player intervention
- Consequences persist and accumulate

If you enjoy setting up situations and seeing what happens—rather than planning story arcs—Manifold supports that style of play.

3.1.2 You are comfortable exercising judgment

Manifold relies on GM and table judgment.

- Not every situation has a hard rule
- Context matters more than precision
- Consistency matters more than correctness

If you want a system that *supports* judgment instead of replacing it, Manifold is designed for that.

3.1.3 You want characters shaped by history, not builds

Manifold characters are defined by:

- What they can reliably do
- What they struggle with
- What risks they carry
- What they have survived

There are no classes, no stat arrays, and no optimal build paths. Characters differentiate through play, not during character creation.

3.1.4 You value consequence over success

Manifold is not primarily concerned with whether actions succeed or fail.

What matters is: - What changed - What pressure increased or released - What new risks were introduced

If you enjoy games where failure is informative rather than punitive, Manifold will feel natural.

3.1.5 You want low metagame play

Manifold has: - No meta-currencies - No action economy to exploit - No min/max optimization

Advantage comes from understanding the situation and making good decisions—not from system mastery.

3.1.6 You want shared engagement at the table

Manifold assumes that everyone participates continuously.

- Actions often resolve simultaneously
- Outcomes are blended
- Players help assess feasibility and interpret results

If you prefer games where attention does not collapse between turns, Manifold supports that style.

3.2 Manifold Is Probably *Not* for You If...

3.2.1 You want tightly defined procedures for every situation

If you are uncomfortable making judgment calls or prefer exhaustive rule coverage, Manifold may feel under-specified.

3.2.2 You enjoy optimizing builds or mastering action efficiency

If your fun comes from: - finding optimal combinations - maximizing bonuses - acting more often or more efficiently than others

Manifold intentionally removes those surfaces.

3.2.3 You prefer adversarial or competitive play

Manifold assumes good-faith cooperation.

- The GM is not an opponent
- The system does not protect against bad-faith play

Tables that enjoy adversarial dynamics will likely be frustrated.

3.2.4 You want quick tactical resolution as the primary focus

While Manifold can handle conflict and danger, it does not center play around tactical mini-games or turn-by-turn optimization.

3.3 A Final Note

If you read this section and feel *intrigued* rather than reassured, that is a good sign.

Manifold rewards: - curiosity - attention - patience - trust

If those sound like qualities you enjoy bringing to the table, Manifold may be exactly the game you're looking for.

3.4 How to Continue

If you are still here, the next chapter explains the **role you take on** when running Manifold.

It begins with who you are at the table—not with rules.

Next: Act I – Chapter I: What You Are Doing Here

4 Act I – Chapter II-A: A Visual Overview of State

Before moving further, it helps to **see what Manifold looks like in use**.

The following pages introduce **State Sheets**: the shared surface where game state lives during play. You are not expected to understand every part of this yet. Nothing here is a rule you must memorize or a procedure you must follow.

This overview exists so that as concepts like *pressure*, *instability*, *outcomes*, and *capabilities* are introduced in later acts, you already have a mental image of **where those ideas land**. You will return to this chapter many times—but for now, simply notice its shape.

5 State Sheets: A Visual Overview

State Sheets are the primary way Manifold tracks and communicates game state.

They replace traditional character sheets, encounter notes, and many GM-only records with a **single, shared format**.

This section is intentionally visual and non-procedural. It exists to orient you, not to instruct you.

5.1 What a State Sheet Is

A **State Sheet** is a snapshot of what currently matters in play.

It captures: - Ongoing pressures - Active instability - Persistent conditions - Capabilities in use -
The scope of what is affected

Manifold does not distinguish between characters, factions, locations, or situations at the tracking level. All of these can be represented on a State Sheet.

5.2 One Sheet, One Situation

A State Sheet usually represents a single situation, location, or ongoing problem.

You may have multiple State Sheets over the course of play, but only the ones that currently matter should be present at the table.

Old sheets do not need to remain in active use.

They may be archived for posterity, reference, or reflection if you wish—but archived sheets do not dictate current state.

History informs judgment, but it does not directly justify outcome shaping. Only the **current** State Sheet defines what is presently strained, unstable, or available.

5.3 State Sheets Are Disposable

State Sheets are **disposable, versioned artifacts**.

When the situation changes enough that the current sheet no longer represents reality, you create a new one and carry forward only what still matters.

You may keep older sheets as a record of how the situation evolved, but they exist outside active play.

They do not grant permission, enforce consequence, or determine outcomes.

This keeps state legible and prevents accumulated history from silently overriding present conditions.

5.4 Visibility Is a Physical Choice

State Sheets can be: - Fully visible to everyone - Partially shared - Kept private by the GM

This is not controlled by rules.

It is controlled by where the sheet is placed and who can see it.

Visibility is a physical, social choice at the table.

5.5 What State Sheets Are Not

State Sheets are not: - Character builds - Power lists - Balance tools - Hidden mechanics

They do not grant permission.

They record consequence.

5.6 Why This Comes Early

This overview is placed here so that later chapters can build meaning onto a structure you have already seen.

When you read about: - Pressure accumulating - Instability persisting - Outcomes narrowing - Capabilities hardening

You will already know where that information *goes*.

5.7 You Will Learn This Gradually

You are not expected to understand or use State Sheets yet.

Later acts will explain: - What information belongs on them - How it is added or removed - How they interact with resolution

For now, this chapter exists only to give you a shared visual reference.

Next: Act I – Chapter III continues by introducing the core assumptions that govern how this information is interpreted in play.

6 Act I – Chapter II: What This Game Is (and Is Not)

This chapter narrows the focus.

You now know *who you are* at the table. This chapter clarifies *what kind of game you are running*—by being explicit about both its commitments and its exclusions.

Understanding what Manifold **refuses to do** is just as important as understanding what it supports.

6.1 This Is a Game About Consequence, Not Success

Manifold does not organize play around success and failure.

Instead, it cares about: - What changed - What pressure increased or released - What new risks emerged - What future actions became easier or harder

An action can: - “Succeed” and still make things worse - “Fail” and still move the situation forward - Partially work while creating lasting problems

You do not need to protect players from failure.

Failure is not a dead end in this game. It is one of the primary ways the world becomes interesting.

6.2 This Is Not a Game of Permission

Manifold does not ask: > “Are you allowed to do this?”

It asks: > “If you try this, what is likely to happen?”

There are no action lists to consult and no abilities that grant universal permission.

Whether something is possible depends on: - The current state of the character - The state of the world - The pressures already in play

Your role is not to gate actions behind rules.

Your role is to be honest about feasibility and consequence.

6.3 This Is Not an Adversarial Game

You are not playing against the players.

The game does not assume: - Deception between GM and players - Hidden target numbers - Secret difficulty scaling - Surprise punishments

When outcomes are harsh, they should make sense *in hindsight*.

Players should be able to say: > “Yes—this tracks. We let that pressure build.”

If an outcome feels arbitrary, something has gone wrong.

6.4 This Is a Cooperative Reasoning Game

Manifold assumes that everyone at the table is thinking together.

Players are expected to: - Explain what they are attempting - Justify why it should be feasible - Help interpret outcomes

You are expected to: - Provide context and constraints - Express world pressure honestly - Facilitate shared understanding

You are not the sole processor of the game.

If the table is quiet and waiting for you to decide everything, slow down and invite reasoning.

6.5 This Game Does Not Optimize for Fairness

Manifold does not attempt to ensure: - Equal spotlight every scene - Symmetrical challenge - Balanced opposition - Predictable difficulty curves

Instead, it prioritizes: - Causal coherence - Persistent consequence - Meaningful asymmetry

Some characters will be better positioned than others in a given situation.

That is not a problem to fix. It is a fact of the world to acknowledge.

6.6 This Game Does Not Reward Clever Rule Use

There is no advantage to: - Finding edge cases - Exploiting phrasing - Chaining mechanics - Playing the system instead of the fiction

If an argument relies on technical interpretation rather than shared understanding, it is probably misaligned.

This does not mean players cannot be clever.

It means cleverness is expressed through *planning*, *positioning*, and *risk acceptance*—not rule mastery.

6.7 What This Game *Is*

Manifold *is* a game where: - The world exists independently of the players - Pressure accumulates over time - Actions reshape future possibility - Dice express uncertainty, not judgment - Growth and deterioration are both expected

It supports: - Long-term play without power inflation - Character identity emerging through action - Stories that arise from consequence rather than plot

6.8 A Note for Experienced GMs

If you are used to systems where: - The GM prepares challenges - The rules resolve disputes - Dice decide success

You may feel like something is missing.

What is missing is *permission structure*.

In its place is: - Shared reasoning - Explicit stakes - Traceable consequence

Once that shift settles, the workload drops dramatically.

6.9 Take This With You

As you continue:

- Do not look for hidden difficulty
- Do not protect the players from consequence
- Do not wait for the rules to tell you what happens

Describe the world honestly. Let pressure do its work.

The rest of the manual exists to support those instincts.

Next: Act I – Chapter III explores how play is shared, and why the GM is not the engine of the game.

7 Act I – Chapter III: How Play Is Shared

This chapter explains how responsibility is distributed at the table.

By now, you know that you are not running a contest and not enforcing a script. What remains is understanding **how play actually moves forward** when no one is “the engine.”

Manifold works because thinking, interpretation, and narration are shared.

7.1 You Are Not the Engine of the Game

In many roleplaying games, play advances because the GM pushes it forward.

- The GM asks for rolls
- The GM decides when scenes end
- The GM resolves uncertainty
- The GM keeps everything moving

Manifold does not assume this structure.

If you try to carry the game alone, play will feel heavy and slow.

Instead, the system is designed so that **progress emerges from interaction**, not orchestration.

7.2 What Players Are Responsible For

Players in Manifold are active participants in resolution, not passive recipients of outcomes.

They are expected to: - Declare *what* they are attempting - Explain *how* they are attempting it - Justify *why* it should be feasible - Stay engaged even when not acting directly

This is not rules lawyering.

It is shared reasoning about the situation.

If a player cannot explain why something should work, that is not a failure—it is an invitation to clarify the fiction.

7.3 What You Are Responsible For

Your responsibility is not to decide outcomes alone.

Your responsibility is to: - Describe the world honestly - Clarify constraints and pressures - Make consequences legible - Preserve causal continuity

You are the **custodian of state**, not the sole authority on meaning.

When you are unsure, say so out loud. Invite the table to reason with you.

7.4 Shared Understanding Comes Before Resolution

Before dice are ever considered, the table should broadly agree on: - What is being attempted - What is at stake - What could reasonably happen

If there is disagreement at this stage, pause.

Do not rush to mechanics to resolve a misunderstanding.

Most friction in play comes from mismatched expectations, not bad outcomes.

7.5 Simultaneity Requires Participation

Many actions in Manifold resolve at the same time.

This means: - No one has perfect information - No one waits passively for their “turn” - Everyone stays attentive to how actions overlap

Simultaneity only works if players remain mentally present.

If attention drops between actions, slow the pace and restate what is happening.

7.6 Conversation Is Not a Failure Mode

Manifold expects discussion.

- Talking through intent is normal

- Negotiating understanding is healthy
- Pausing to align expectations is part of play

If a scene feels stuck, it is usually because the table needs more shared context—not because a rule is missing.

Silence is a signal. Use it.

7.7 When to Intervene

You should intervene when: - Assumptions about the world diverge - Pressure or consequence is being overlooked - One player is carrying the cognitive load alone

You should *not* intervene simply to keep things moving.

Clarity is more important than speed.

7.8 What This Act Has Established

At the end of Act I, you should be clear that:

- You are curating a world, not running a contest
- The game is about consequence, not success
- Play advances through shared reasoning
- Responsibility is distributed, not centralized

You do not need rules yet.

You need alignment.

Act II begins by showing how this shared responsibility expresses itself in the flow of actual play.

8 Act II – Chapter I: How Play Moves

Act I established *who you are* at the table and *how responsibility is shared*. Act II begins with the question most GMs actually ask next:

What does play look like, moment to moment?

This chapter answers that question without introducing mechanics. Its goal is to give you a **sense of rhythm**—how play advances, pauses, and changes focus over time.

8.1 Play Moves in Uneven Bursts

Manifold does not move in fixed turns or rigid phases.

Instead, play advances in **uneven bursts of attention**:

- Sometimes time flows freely
- Sometimes it compresses
- Sometimes it slows to a crawl around a critical moment

You do not need to manage this consciously.

Your job is simply to notice **when attention shifts**, and let the mode of play change with it.

8.2 Scenes Begin When Something Is at Stake

A scene begins when: - A meaningful choice appears - Pressure becomes relevant - Consequence is possible

A scene does *not* begin because: - Time passed - A location changed - The players asked to do something trivial

If nothing is at stake, let play flow without structure.

When something *does* matter, slow down and bring it into focus.

8.3 Scenes End When the Question Is Answered

Every focused moment in play is implicitly asking a question:

- *Do they get what they want?*
- *At what cost?*
- *What changes because of this?*

A scene ends when that question has been answered clearly enough to move on.

Do not drag scenes out to “use up time.”

Once the consequence is clear, let the game breathe again.

8.4 Time Expands and Contracts

Manifold treats time as flexible.

- Hours or days may pass in a sentence
- Seconds may take several minutes of table discussion

This is intentional.

Zoom in when: - Decisions are risky - Pressure is high - Outcomes are irreversible

Zoom out when: - Actions are routine - Consequence is low - The details do not matter

You are not skipping content when you zoom out.

You are choosing what deserves attention.

8.5 Everyone Declares Intent Before Resolution

When play slows down around an important moment, ask:

“What are you trying to do?”

Give everyone space to answer before anything resolves.

This creates: - Shared context - Clear stakes - Fewer surprises

You are not locking players into exact outcomes.

You are capturing a snapshot of intent before uncertainty enters.

8.6 Unknowns Are Preserved Until They Matter

Do not rush to resolve uncertainty.

It is often useful to leave things unclear until: - Pressure applies - Actions overlap - Consequences become unavoidable

Certainty too early removes tension.

Let questions hang until the moment they must be answered.

8.7 Movement Is Not Always Forward

Play does not need to constantly escalate.

It is normal for play to: - Pause for discussion - Circle back to clarify assumptions - Slow down when things become complex

This is not lost momentum.

It is the table maintaining shared understanding.

8.8 Your Primary Tool Is Attention

You do not advance play with rules.

You advance play by: - Choosing what to focus on - Naming what matters - Letting go of what does not

If play feels stuck, ask yourself:

What deserves attention right now?

Then bring the table there.

8.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should feel comfortable:

- Letting play flow without structure
- Slowing down when stakes appear
- Ending scenes decisively
- Shifting time scale without apology

You are not managing turns.

You are managing focus.

Next: Act II – Chapter II introduces play modes, giving names and structure to these shifts in focus.

9 Act II – Chapter II: Play Modes

In the previous chapter, you learned to manage *focus*. This chapter gives names and light structure to the most common patterns that focus takes during play.

These are called **Play Modes**.

Play modes are not phases, turns, or rulesets. They are **ways of paying attention**. Switching between them is normal, expected, and often fluid.

Don't worry yet about how you track state, decide outcomes, or know exactly what should happen next.

At this stage, you only need to recognize *how tightly attention should be held*. The tools for tracking state and resolving uncertainty are introduced later, once this rhythm is familiar.

9.1 What a Play Mode Is

A play mode describes:

- How tightly time is focused
- How much uncertainty is in play
- How much consequence is at stake

Play modes help you answer a simple question:

Do we need to slow down right now, or can we let this pass quickly?

You do not announce play modes at the table.

You *recognize* them and let your handling of time and attention shift accordingly.

9.2 The Three Core Play Modes

Manifold uses three core play modes:

1. **Free Play**
2. **Traversal Play**
3. **Focused Scene Play**

These modes cover nearly all table situations.

They differ in *how much structure is appropriate*, not in what the characters are allowed to do.

9.3 Free Play

9.3.1 What It Is

Free Play is the default state of the game.

It is used when:

- Characters are talking, planning, or exploring casually
- Actions are routine or low-risk
- Consequence is minimal or distant

Time flows loosely.

You may summarize minutes, hours, or even days without stopping to resolve uncertainty.

9.3.2 How It Feels at the Table

- Conversation flows naturally
- Players act without waiting for turns
- You respond descriptively, not procedurally

Most actions in Free Play do **not** require dice.

If something is clearly possible, it happens. If something is clearly impossible, it does not.

9.3.3 Your Job in Free Play

- Describe the world honestly
- Answer questions clearly
- Seed pressure quietly
- Let players act without interruption

Do not manufacture tension.

If nothing meaningful is at stake, let the moment pass.

9.4 Traversal Play

9.4.1 What It Is

Traversal Play is used when characters move through space, time, or circumstance where **background pressure matters**.

Common examples include:

- Travel between locations
- Operating in dangerous regions
- Long-term undertakings with uncertain conditions

Time advances in **compressed blocks**.

9.4.2 How It Feels at the Table

- Time skips forward in chunks
- You check in periodically
- Disruption is possible, but not constant

Most of the time, things go as expected.

Traversal Play exists to answer the question:

Does anything interrupt this?

9.4.3 Your Job in Traversal Play

- Advance time deliberately
- Track accumulating pressure
- Introduce complications when warranted

Do not turn traversal into a sequence of constant checks.

If nothing interferes, say so and move on.

9.5 Focused Scene Play

9.5.1 What It Is

Focused Scene Play is used when:

- Outcomes hinge on moment-to-moment decisions
- Pressure is high
- Consequences are immediate and irreversible

This includes:

- Physical conflict
- Tense negotiations
- Chases, rituals, duels, or disasters

Time slows down.

9.5.2 How It Feels at the Table

- Everyone declares intent
- Actions overlap and interfere
- Uncertainty must be resolved explicitly

Focused Scene Play is where dice are *most likely* to appear—but still not guaranteed.

9.5.3 Your Job in Focused Scene Play

- Make intent explicit
- Preserve simultaneity

- Keep stakes visible
- Resolve uncertainty honestly

Do not look for turn order.

If actions overlap, they resolve together.

9.6 Switching Between Modes

You can shift play modes at any time.

Common transitions include:

- Free Play → Focused Scene when stakes appear
- Focused Scene → Free Play once the outcome is clear
- Traversal → Focused Scene when something interrupts the journey

You do not need permission to switch.

If the focus changes, the mode changes with it.

9.7 What Play Modes Are *Not*

Play modes are not:

- Rules containers
- Permission systems
- Initiative structures
- Encounter types

They do not limit creativity.

They exist to reduce cognitive load by matching structure to stakes.

9.8 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be able to:

- Recognize when play needs more or less structure
- Let time move appropriately for the situation
- Avoid over-resolving trivial moments
- Slow down confidently when things matter

You are not choosing a mode.

You are noticing one.

Next: Act II – Chapter III explores how intent is declared and shared before uncertainty is resolved.

10 Act II – Chapter III: Declaring Intent

So far, you have learned how play *flows* and how focus *shifts*. This chapter introduces the moment where play becomes explicit enough to support uncertainty.

That moment is **declaring intent**.

Declaring intent is not a mechanical step. It is a conversational alignment tool. Its purpose is to make sure everyone is reasoning about the same situation *before* outcomes are considered.

10.1 What Declaring Intent Is

Declaring intent means clearly stating:

- What a character is trying to do
- What they are trying to change
- What they are trying to prevent or protect

It is a statement of **aim**, not of outcome.

Examples of intent: - “I’m trying to get past the guards without raising an alarm.” - “I want to stop the ritual before it completes.” - “I’m trying to keep her talking long enough for the others to escape.”

Intent answers the question:

What would it look like if this went well?

It does **not** answer how well it goes, how much it costs, or whether it fully works.

10.2 Why Intent Comes First

Manifold relies on intent because:

- Dice do not decide permission
- Outcomes are shaped before uncertainty is sampled
- Multiple actions often overlap

Without clear intent, resolution becomes guesswork.

Declaring intent ensures that when uncertainty appears, it is attached to something concrete.

10.3 Everyone Declares Before Anything Resolves

When play slows into a Focused Scene, pause and ask everyone involved:

“What are you trying to do?”

Let all relevant participants answer before resolving anything.

This creates: - A shared snapshot of attempted actions - Fewer retroactive corrections - Fairness without turn order

No one is committing to a script. They are committing to *attempts made under uncertainty*.

10.4 Intent Is Not a Commitment to Success

Declaring intent does not promise results.

A character may: - Achieve their intent partially - Succeed at high cost - Be diverted by interference
- Fail in a way that still changes the situation

Intent establishes *direction*, not outcome.

10.5 Clarifying Intent Is a GM Responsibility

If an intent is unclear, vague, or overloaded, slow down.

You should ask clarifying questions such as: - “What are you actually trying to change here?” - “Is your priority speed, secrecy, or safety?” - “What happens if this doesn’t work?”

This is not interrogation.

It is collaborative sharpening.

Clear intent reduces later conflict and confusion.

10.6 Multiple Intents Can Coexist

It is normal for several intents to be declared at once.

They may: - Support each other - Overlap - Compete - Interfere

You do not need to sort these out immediately.

Simply capture them honestly. How they interact will be addressed later.

10.7 When Intent Is Not Needed

Not every action requires formal intent declaration.

You do *not* need to slow down when: - Actions are trivial - Outcomes are obvious - No meaningful pressure is involved

If nothing is uncertain and nothing meaningful is at stake, let it happen.

Declaring intent is a tool, not a ritual.

10.8 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Pausing play to align on intent
- Asking everyone to declare before resolution
- Separating what characters *want* from what *happens*
- Letting multiple intents exist at once

You are not predicting outcomes.

You are fixing the question before it is answered.

Next: Act II – Chapter IV introduces how uncertainty enters play, and when dice are actually used.

11 Act II – Chapter IV: Uncertainty and When Dice Enter

Up to this point, nothing you have learned requires dice.

That is intentional.

Dice are not the engine of play in Manifold. They are a **tool for sampling uncertainty**—and they are used only when uncertainty actually matters.

This chapter explains *when* uncertainty enters play, and *why* dice appear when they do.

11.1 Uncertainty Is Not Everywhere

In many games, dice are rolled constantly.

Manifold does the opposite.

Most actions do **not** require dice because: - The outcome is obvious - The risk is negligible - Nothing meaningful would change

If an action would clearly succeed, it happens. If an action would clearly fail, it does not.

Rolling dice in these cases adds noise, not drama.

11.2 When Uncertainty Matters

Uncertainty matters when **more than one outcome is genuinely possible**, and the difference between those outcomes would change the situation.

Before dice are considered, ask:

- Could this reasonably go more than one way?
- Would different outcomes introduce different consequences?
- Would the result change future choices or pressure?

If the answer to any of these is “no,” do not roll.

11.3 Dice Do Not Decide Permission

Dice are never used to answer:

“Can you do this?”

That question must already be answered through shared understanding of the situation.

Dice are used only to answer:

“Given that this is possible, *how does it unfold?*”

If feasibility is unclear, pause and clarify intent and context.

Do not reach for dice to resolve a disagreement about what is allowed.

11.4 One Roll Answers One Question

When dice are used, they resolve **one coherent uncertainty**.

Avoid rolling: - For every step of a process - To probe for information incrementally - To bargain outcomes up or down

Instead, let a single roll cover an entire meaningful beat.

This keeps play fast and outcomes legible.

11.5 Dice Appear Most Often in Focused Scenes

Dice are *most likely* to appear during Focused Scene Play, because: - Stakes are immediate - Actions overlap - Pressure is high

Even here, dice are not automatic.

If the outcome is already clear from state and context, let it resolve without rolling.

11.6 What Dice Actually Do

When dice enter play, they do **one thing only**:

They select **which of several already-possible outcomes occurs**.

They do not: - Create new possibilities - Override impossibility - Decide success versus failure

The range of possible outcomes is established *before* dice are rolled.

The roll samples that range.

11.7 Leaving Uncertainty Open

You do not need to resolve uncertainty the moment it appears.

It is often useful to: - Let pressure build - Allow multiple intents to interact - Delay resolution until stakes are clear

Dice should be rolled when uncertainty can no longer be ignored—not at the first hint of risk.

11.8 Common Reasons to Over-Roll

If you find yourself reaching for dice frequently, check whether you are:

- Using dice to add excitement instead of consequence
- Rolling to avoid making a judgment call
- Treating dice as a pacing tool

Dice are not there to keep play interesting.

Pressure and consequence do that work.

11.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Letting obvious actions resolve without rolls
- Holding uncertainty open until it matters
- Calling for a roll only when outcomes diverge meaningfully
- Treating dice as samplers, not judges

You are not deciding success.

You are deciding *when uncertainty deserves a voice*.

Next: Act III begins by explaining how possible outcomes are shaped before dice are ever rolled.

12 Act III – Chapter I: Possible Outcomes

Everything so far has been about *when* to slow down and *why* uncertainty might matter.

This chapter explains **what uncertainty actually operates on** in Manifold.

Before dice are rolled—before numbers, symbols, or procedures appear—the table establishes a set of **possible outcomes**.

Dice never decide *what is possible*. They only select among possibilities that already exist.

12.1 Outcomes Come Before Dice

In Manifold, uncertainty is never raw.

You do not roll dice and then decide what happened.

Instead: 1. The table agrees on what could reasonably happen 2. Those possibilities are shaped by the current situation 3. Dice are used only to select among them

If you do not know what the possible outcomes are, you are not ready to roll.

12.2 What Counts as an Outcome

An **outcome** is a meaningful change in the situation.

Outcomes describe: - What changed in the world - What cost was paid - What control was kept or lost - What new pressure or opportunity emerged

Outcomes are not labels like *success* or *failure*.

Two outcomes may both be acceptable—or both be bad—in different ways.

12.3 The Range of Outcomes Is Bounded

Every action exists within limits.

Those limits come from: - The fiction of the situation - The current state of the characters - Existing pressure and instability - Other actions happening at the same time

These limits define a **bounded range** of possible outcomes.

Nothing outside that range can occur, no matter what the dice say.

12.4 More Than One Way for Things to Go Wrong

Failure in Manifold is rarely singular.

Things can go wrong by: - Cost increasing - Control slipping - Unintended consequences emerging - Pressure escalating

When you think about outcomes, look for *different kinds* of trouble—not just worse versions of the same result.

This is what gives rolls texture.

12.5 Outcomes Are Chosen for Meaning, Not Balance

You are not trying to design fair or symmetrical outcomes.

You are trying to describe **honest consequences**.

Ask yourself: - What would this look like if it went smoothly? - What would it look like if it worked but caused problems? - What would it look like if it collapsed under pressure?

If the answers feel dramatically different, you are on the right track.

12.6 Fewer Outcomes Are Better

Resist the urge to create many fine-grained results.

Most situations work best with: - A small number of clearly distinct outcomes - Differences that matter immediately

If outcomes blur together, the roll will feel meaningless.

Clarity beats completeness.

12.7 Outcomes Can Include Tradeoffs

An outcome does not have to be “good” or “bad.”

Common tradeoff patterns include: - Success with cost - Control traded for speed - Safety traded for exposure - Progress traded for instability

These tradeoffs are where player choice and consequence intersect.

12.8 You Are Not Locking in Narrative

Defining possible outcomes does **not** mean pre-writing the story.

You are establishing the *shape* of what could happen, not the details.

The exact fiction emerges when an outcome is realized.

Leave room to interpret.

12.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Thinking about uncertainty as a bounded space
- Describing multiple meaningful ways an action could resolve
- Separating what is possible from what is selected
- Refusing to roll when outcomes are unclear

You are not predicting the future.

You are defining the space it can occupy.

Next: Act III – Chapter II explains how possible outcomes are grouped into tiers so they can be sampled cleanly.

13 Act III – Chapter II: Outcome Tiers

In the previous chapter, you learned to define **what could happen**.

This chapter explains how those possibilities are organized so uncertainty can be sampled cleanly and consistently.

Manifold does this by grouping possible outcomes into **Outcome Tiers**.

Outcome tiers are not scores, ratings, or success levels. They are a way of clustering consequences by *meaning*, not by quality.

13.1 What an Outcome Tier Is

An **Outcome Tier** is a grouping of outcomes that are *similar in impact*, even if their details differ.

Each tier represents: - A general degree of control - A general level of cost or consequence - A general direction the situation moves

Tiers exist to answer this question:

How far does this situation move, and at what kind of price?

They do **not** exist to measure performance.

13.2 Tiers Are Defined Before Dice

Outcome tiers must be established *before* any dice are rolled.

If you roll first and then invent tiers to fit the result, the roll has already failed.

Before uncertainty is sampled, the table should broadly understand: - What the best plausible outcomes look like - What middling or compromised outcomes look like - What severe or collapsing outcomes look like

Exact wording is not required. Shared understanding is.

13.3 Tiers Are Qualitative, Not Numeric

Outcome tiers are described in plain language.

They do not use: - Numbers - Percentages - Margins of success - Difficulty ratings

Examples of tier distinctions: - “Clean and controlled” vs “messy but workable” vs “unstable or collapsing” - “Achieves the goal” vs “achieves it with consequences” vs “fails and escalates pressure”

The language will vary by situation.

What matters is that the tiers feel **distinct**.

13.4 Fewer Tiers Are Better

Most situations work best with a **small number of tiers**.

In practice: - Two tiers is often enough - Three tiers covers most meaningful uncertainty - More than four tiers is usually unnecessary

If you cannot clearly explain how tiers differ, collapse them.

A roll that selects between unclear tiers will feel arbitrary.

13.5 Tiers Describe Direction, Not Detail

An outcome tier sets the *direction* of change, not its exact expression.

For example, a tier might imply: - Loss of control - Increased exposure - New instability

The specific fiction is narrated *after* the tier is selected.

This keeps outcomes flexible and grounded in the moment.

13.6 Tiers Can Include Tradeoffs

A higher tier is not always “better.”

Some tiers may offer: - Faster progress at higher cost - Safer outcomes with less progress - Stability now with trouble later

These tradeoffs should be visible when tiers are defined.

This is how player priorities shape meaning, even before dice are rolled.

13.7 Avoid Binary Thinking

Outcome tiers replace the idea of pure success versus failure.

Instead of asking: - “Did they succeed?”

Ask: - “Which kind of outcome occurred?”

Even the worst tier should usually *do something*.

Stalled situations are a sign that tiers are too narrow.

13.8 When Tiers Feel Wrong

If, after a roll, the selected tier feels nonsensical, pause.

This usually means one of three things: - The tiers were not defined clearly - Pressure or interference was overlooked - Intent was not aligned before resolution

Fix the cause, not the roll.

13.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Grouping outcomes by meaning rather than quality
- Defining tiers before rolling
- Keeping tiers few and distinct
- Narrating results after selection

You are not judging success.

You are distinguishing *kinds of consequence*.

Next: Act III – Chapter III explores how state, pressure, and context shape which tiers are even available.

14 Act III – Chapter III: Shaping the Outcome Space

In the previous chapters, you learned how to define **possible outcomes** and group them into **outcome tiers**.

This chapter explains the final step that happens *before* any dice are rolled:

Not all tiers are always available.

The current situation—its history, pressures, and constraints—*shapes* the Outcome Space by narrowing, distorting, or removing tiers.

This shaping is where most of the system’s weight actually lives.

14.1 Outcome Space Is Not Neutral

An Outcome Space is never a blank slate.

What can happen right now is shaped by: - What has already happened - What pressure has accumulated - What instability is unresolved - What resources are strained or depleted

Two identical actions attempted in different situations should not offer the same tiers.
If they do, the game is ignoring its own history.

14.2 State Defines What Is Available

The primary shaper of the Outcome Space is **state**.

State includes: - Persistent conditions on characters - Ongoing world tensions - Lingering injuries, fatigue, or instability - Established advantages or compromises

State does not *decide* outcomes.

It decides **which outcomes are even on the table**.

14.3 Pressure Narrows Safe Outcomes

As pressure builds, the Outcome Space changes.

Common effects of pressure include: - Removing the cleanest tiers - Increasing the cost attached to success - Making unstable outcomes more likely

Pressure does not usually make actions impossible.

Instead, it makes *safe* resolution less available.

This is how risk escalates without sudden failure.

14.4 Instability Distorts Control

Instability represents unresolved volatility.

When instability is present: - Outcomes become harder to control - Tradeoffs become sharper - Partial or messy tiers become more prominent

Instability should always be visible in the Outcome Space.

If instability exists but the tiers look unchanged, it is being ignored.

14.5 Context Can Remove Tiers Entirely

Sometimes, shaping means removing tiers altogether.

Examples include: - A clean escape is no longer possible once the alarm is raised - A delicate solution is unavailable when time has run out - A careful approach cannot exist in total chaos

This is not punishment.

It is consequence.

14.6 Shaping Happens Before Dice

All shaping must happen *before* uncertainty is sampled.

If you roll dice and then realize: - A tier should not have been possible - Pressure should have mattered more - Instability was overlooked

Pause and correct the Outcome Space.

Do not let the roll stand on a broken foundation.

14.7 Shaping Is a Judgment Call

There is no formula for shaping an Outcome Space.

You will make judgment calls based on: - The fiction - The accumulated state - The table's shared understanding

This is expected.

Consistency matters more than precision.

If players can look back and say "that makes sense," you have done it right.

14.8 Shaping Is Where Fairness Emerges

Manifold does not pursue fairness through symmetry.

It achieves fairness through **traceability**.

When players can see: - How earlier choices narrowed options - How pressure removed safety - How instability distorted control

Outcomes feel earned, even when they are harsh.

14.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Removing or altering tiers based on state
- Letting pressure close off safe outcomes

- Making instability visible in what is possible
- Correcting Outcome Spaces before rolling

You are not adjusting difficulty.

You are honoring history.

Next: Act III – Chapter IV introduces how dice sample the shaped Outcome Space without expanding it.

15 Act III – Chapter IV: Sampling the Outcome Space

You have now defined **what could happen**, grouped those possibilities into **tiers**, and shaped which tiers are **available right now**.

This chapter explains the limited, precise role dice play once that work is done.

Dice do not add meaning. They **sample** from meaning that already exists.

15.1 What Dice Are Allowed to Do

In Manifold, dice do exactly one job:

They select which available outcome tier is realized.

That is all.

Dice do not: - Create new tiers - Restore removed tiers - Override impossibility - Decide intent or permission

If a die result would require any of the above, the roll is invalid.

15.2 Sampling, Not Judgment

Think of dice as a probe, not a referee.

They answer:

Given this shaped Outcome Space, which tier manifests?

They do **not** answer: - “Did the character succeed?” - “How skilled was the attempt?” - “Who did better?”

Those questions belong to intent, state, and consequence—not to dice.

15.3 One Roll, One Selection

A single roll selects **one tier**.

Avoid: - Multiple rolls to reach a single outcome - Rerolling to negotiate a better result - Rolling separately for cost, control, and effect

All of that meaning should already be embedded in the tiers.

When the roll lands, selection is complete.

15.4 Dice Never Expand the Space

Rolling dice must never make a previously unavailable tier possible.

If the clean tier was removed during shaping, it stays removed.

If a catastrophic tier was the only remaining option, the roll selects *how* that catastrophe manifests—not whether it occurs.

This is how consequence remains traceable.

15.5 Blended and Edge Results

Sometimes a roll points near the boundary between tiers.

When this happens: - Do not invent new tiers - Do not split the result into multiple rolls

Instead, realize a **blended outcome** that clearly derives from existing tiers.

Blends should: - Preserve the direction of the selected tier - Borrow elements from adjacent tiers - Remain explainable in hindsight

Blending refines meaning; it does not escape it.

15.6 When Not to Roll (Again)

After a tier is selected: - Do not roll to see if the consequence “sticks” - Do not roll to mitigate the result retroactively

The roll has spoken.

Mitigation, recovery, or reversal happen through **future action**, not through re-sampling the same uncertainty.

15.7 Dice Respect Simultaneity

When multiple intents resolve together, dice sample a **shared Outcome Space**.

This means: - Results may interfere - One character's outcome may distort another's - Control may be lost even when progress is made

Dice do not sequence events.

They select a snapshot of reality where everything happens at once.

15.8 If the Roll Feels Wrong

If, after rolling, the result feels incoherent, stop.

Do not force narration to justify a bad foundation.

Ask instead: - Was the Outcome Space shaped honestly? - Were tiers defined clearly? - Was intent aligned?

Fix the structure, then roll again if needed.

The problem is almost never the dice.

15.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Treating dice as selectors, not judges
- Enforcing the limits of the shaped Outcome Space
- Resolving uncertainty in a single, decisive roll
- Explaining results without appealing to luck

You are not letting dice decide the story.

You are letting them choose *which consequence becomes real*.

Next: Act IV begins by introducing pressure and instability as persistent forces that shape future Outcome Spaces.

16 Act IV – Chapter I: Pressure as a Persistent Force

So far, you have seen how moments resolve.

Act IV shifts focus from *moments* to *accumulation*.

This chapter introduces **pressure**: the slow, persistent force that shapes future Outcome Spaces long before dice are rolled.

Pressure is how the world remembers what has been ignored, overused, strained, or left unresolved.

16.1 What Pressure Is

Pressure is **ongoing strain** in the world.

It represents: - Resources being stretched - Situations becoming volatile - Margins for error shrinking
- Systems nearing their limits

Pressure is not an event.

It is a condition that builds over time.

16.2 Pressure Is Not Opposition

The world does not oppose the characters.

It does not plan against them or escalate to “win.”

Pressure accumulates because: - Actions have costs - Problems are deferred - Stability is consumed

When things become harder, it is not because the world is angry.

It is because pressure has been allowed to build.

16.3 Pressure Exists Before the Roll

Pressure does not appear because a roll went badly.

It exists **before** uncertainty is sampled.

When dice are rolled, pressure: - Narrows safe outcomes - Increases attached costs - Makes instability more likely

If pressure only shows up after failure, it is being used incorrectly.

16.4 Pressure Accumulates Quietly

Most of the time, pressure grows without immediate effect.

Examples include: - Fatigue building over long effort - Tension rising in a hostile city - Equipment being pushed past its limits - Secrets compounding risk

Nothing may break *yet*.

That does not mean nothing is happening.

16.5 Pressure Is Directional

Pressure always pushes *somewhere*.

It tends to: - Reduce control - Increase cost - Remove clean options

Pressure does not randomize outcomes.

It makes certain kinds of outcomes more likely and others unavailable.

16.6 You Do Not Spend Pressure

Pressure is not a currency.

It is not paid, traded, or optimized.

Once present, pressure remains until: - It is released through action - It collapses into instability -
The situation changes meaningfully

Ignoring pressure does not keep it neutral.

It lets it grow.

16.7 Pressure Applies Broadly

Pressure often affects more than one character or action.

Examples: - A dangerous environment increases risk for everyone - Political tension makes all negotiations brittle - Time pressure degrades careful approaches

Pressure is a property of the **situation**, not of individual attempts.

16.8 Recognizing Pressure at the Table

You do not need exact measures.

You should be able to answer questions like: - “What is strained right now?” - “What would break if pushed further?” - “Where is there less room for error than before?”

If you can answer those, pressure is present—even if nothing has gone wrong yet.

16.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Treating difficulty as accumulated strain, not opposition
- Letting unresolved issues narrow future options
- Applying pressure before outcomes, not after
- Allowing situations to become fragile over time

You are not escalating conflict.

You are letting the world show its limits.

Next: Act IV – Chapter II explains how pressure becomes instability, and why collapse is traceable rather than sudden.

17 Act IV – Chapter II: From Pressure to Instability

In the previous chapter, you learned how **pressure accumulates** as unresolved strain.

This chapter explains what happens when pressure is no longer contained.

That moment is called **instability**.

Instability is not randomness, bad luck, or sudden failure. It is pressure becoming *structurally disruptive*.

17.1 What Instability Is

Instability is **persistent volatility**.

It represents: - Systems no longer behaving reliably - Control becoming inconsistent - Outcomes becoming harder to contain - Consequences spreading beyond their origin

Instability is not temporary noise.

Once present, it must be dealt with or lived with.

17.2 Pressure Does Not Instantly Break Things

Pressure builds quietly.

Instability appears when pressure: - Exceeds what a situation can absorb - Is pushed repeatedly without relief - Collapses into a weaker structure

This means: - Problems rarely explode without warning - Sudden disasters usually had visible precursors

If instability feels surprising, pressure was missed.

17.3 Instability Is Traceable

Every instability has a cause.

It should be possible to point to: - The pressure that led to it - The actions that aggravated it - The opportunity to relieve it that was ignored or failed

Instability is never arbitrary.

If you cannot explain *why* it exists, it should not exist.

17.4 Instability Changes How Outcomes Behave

When instability is present: - Clean outcomes are harder to achieve - Partial outcomes become common - Control is lost more easily - Side effects propagate

Instability does not usually remove possibility.

It distorts *reliability*.

17.5 Instability Persists

Unlike pressure, instability does not fade on its own.

It remains until: - Actively stabilized - Replaced by a new equilibrium - Collapsed into a more permanent condition

Ignoring instability does not keep it contained.

It lets it spread.

17.6 Instability Is Not a Punishment

Instability is not applied to teach lessons.

It is not proportional retribution for failure.

It is the natural result of: - Overextension - Neglect - Sustained strain

When instability emerges, treat it as information, not judgment.

17.7 Local vs Systemic Instability

Not all instability is equal in scope.

Some instability is **local**: - A weapon that misfires - A relationship that becomes brittle - A ritual that behaves unpredictably

Other instability is **systemic**: - A city on the brink of unrest - A power grid near collapse - A faction losing internal coherence

Systemic instability reshapes many Outcome Spaces at once.

17.8 Let Instability Be Visible

Instability should be legible at the table.

Players should feel: - Increased risk - Reduced control - Narrower margins

They should not feel ambushed.

If instability is present but invisible, it cannot guide decisions.

17.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Letting pressure collapse into instability
- Treating instability as persistent volatility
- Tracing instability back to prior strain
- Allowing instability to distort future outcomes

You are not escalating danger arbitrarily.

You are letting strain change how the world behaves.

Next: Act IV – Chapter III explains how instability accumulates, interacts, and eventually resolves or hardens into lasting change.

18 Act IV – Chapter III: Living with Instability

Instability is not a momentary problem to solve and move past.

Once it appears, it becomes part of the ongoing situation. This chapter explains how play changes when instability is present—and how characters live, act, and decide under those conditions.

18.1 Instability Changes the Baseline

When instability exists, it becomes the **new normal**.

This means: - Outcomes are less predictable - Control is harder to maintain - Safe options are rarer

You do not “turn instability on and off.”

Once present, it continuously shapes future Outcome Spaces until something meaningful changes.

18.2 Acting Under Instability

Characters can still act effectively under instability.

However, actions taken in unstable conditions tend to: - Carry additional risk - Generate further pressure - Create secondary consequences

This does not mean characters are punished for acting.

It means that effort under instability is *costlier* and *less contained*.

18.3 Instability Interacts with Itself

Multiple sources of instability can coexist.

When they do, they often: - Reinforce each other - Spread effects across domains - Accelerate collapse

You do not need to model these interactions mechanically.

It is enough to recognize that instability compounds rather than cancels out.

18.4 Stabilization Requires Attention

Instability does not resolve on its own.

Stabilization requires: - Time - Effort - Sacrifice - Or accepting a new equilibrium

Sometimes stabilization is deliberate—repair, rest, negotiation, ritual.

Sometimes it happens indirectly—abandoning a goal, leaving a region, changing priorities.

18.5 Partial Stabilization Is Common

Instability is rarely removed all at once.

More often: - One source is reduced while others remain - Symptoms are managed but causes persist
- Control improves without full safety

Partial stabilization is progress.

Treat it as meaningful, even if volatility remains.

18.6 When Instability Hardens

If instability is left unaddressed long enough, it may **harden**.

Hardened instability becomes: - A lasting condition - A permanent scar - A new structural fact of the world

This is how: - Chronic injuries form - Institutions fail - Regions become dangerous

Hardening is not failure.

It is history becoming permanent.

18.7 Choosing Not to Stabilize

Sometimes the table will choose to live with instability.

This is a valid choice.

Reasons include: - Stabilization is too costly - Instability creates opportunity - Other goals matter more

If instability is accepted, reflect that choice honestly in future situations.

The world adapts.

18.8 Making Instability Legible

Your role is to keep instability *visible*.

Players should be able to answer: - “What feels unreliable right now?” - “Where do we have less control than before?” - “What is likely to get worse if we push?”

If those questions have clear answers, instability is doing its job.

18.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Treating instability as an ongoing condition
- Letting actions under instability be riskier without being punitive
- Allowing instability to compound or harden
- Supporting meaningful stabilization without requiring perfection

You are not forcing resolution.

You are letting volatility become part of lived reality.

Next: Act IV – Chapter IV introduces how pressure and instability are represented and tracked so they remain legible over long play.

19 Act IV – Chapter IV: Representing Pressure and Instability

Up to this point, pressure and instability have been **conceptual tools**.

This chapter introduces how they are **represented** so they remain visible, consistent, and manageable over long play.

Representation does not create pressure or instability.

It makes them *legible*.

19.1 Representation Serves Judgment

Pressure and instability exist whether or not they are written down.

Representation exists to: - Reduce cognitive load - Preserve shared understanding - Make history visible

It does **not** exist to: - Replace judgment - Automate outcomes - Enforce precision

If representation ever feels like bookkeeping, simplify it.

19.2 Only Persistent Strain Is Represented

Do not record everything.

Representation is reserved for: - Pressure that will matter later - Instability that persists beyond a moment - Strain that affects multiple future situations

Transient difficulty belongs in description, not notation.

If a strain can be resolved or forgotten immediately, it does not need representation.

19.3 Pressure Is Represented Coarsely

Pressure should be tracked in a **coarse, directional way**.

You are answering questions like: - “Is this situation still stable?” - “Are margins shrinking?” - “Is collapse becoming likely?”

Exact amounts do not matter.

What matters is whether pressure is: - Low and manageable - Building and constraining - Near collapse

19.4 Instability Is Represented Explicitly

Instability should always be **explicitly marked**.

This can take many forms: - A noted condition - A marked track - A visible tag or reminder

What matters is that everyone can see: - That instability exists - Where it applies - That it persists

Invisible instability leads to confusion and mistrust.

19.5 Representation Must Preserve Scope

Pressure and instability have scope.

They may apply to: - A single character - A group or faction - A location or region - An ongoing situation

Representation should make that scope clear.

If players cannot tell *who or what is affected*, the representation is insufficient.

19.6 Collapse and Hardening Should Be Visible

When pressure collapses into instability—or instability hardens into a lasting condition—mark it.

These transitions matter because: - They change future Outcome Spaces - They signal points of no easy return

A visible mark reinforces that history has moved forward.

19.7 Simplify Aggressively

Over time, representation should become **simpler**, not more complex.

Good simplification practices include: - Collapsing multiple pressures into one dominant strain - Replacing many notes with a single condition - Removing resolved or irrelevant marks

If representation grows without bound, meaning is being diluted.

19.8 Representation Is a Shared Reference

Pressure and instability are not GM secrets.

They should be: - Visible - Discussable - Referenced openly when shaping outcomes

This transparency is what makes harsh consequences feel fair.

19.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Deciding what strain deserves representation
- Tracking pressure without false precision
- Making instability explicit and visible
- Simplifying state over time

You are not tracking numbers.

You are preserving memory.

Next: Act V begins by exploring special capabilities—magic, technology, and powers—and how they interact with pressure and instability.

20 Act V – Chapter 0: Character Foundations

Before characters act, grow, or come under pressure, they must **exist as bounded entities** in the world.

This chapter explains how characters enter play in Manifold.

This is sometimes called *character creation*, but that term can be misleading.

You are not building an optimized agent.

You are **declaring a shape**.

Everything described in this chapter will ultimately be recorded on a State Sheet, even if it begins as a conversation.

20.1 What Character Creation (Declaration) Is in Manifold

Creating a character in Manifold is the act of establishing: - What the character is *capable of* - What the character is *not capable of* - Where the character is *vulnerable to pressure* - How the character is likely to *change over time*

This is not done through point allocation, statistics, or balance math.

It is done through **constraint and focus**.

20.2 Characters Are Defined by Constraint

A Manifold character is not defined by everything they can do.

They are defined by what they **cannot** do without cost, risk, or consequence.

Constraints: - Create identity - Shape decision-making - Make pressure meaningful

A character without constraint cannot be challenged honestly.

20.3 Start with a Clear Domain of Capability

Each character begins play with a **clear domain of capability**.

This domain answers the question:

What kinds of problems does this character reliably engage with?

Examples include: - Scouting and travel in hostile terrain - Arcane research and unstable magic - Social negotiation within specific cultures

Domains should be: - Narrow enough to be meaningful - Broad enough to invite action

Do not list techniques or tricks.

Name the space the character occupies.

20.4 Declare Explicit Limits

For every domain of capability, there must be **explicit limits**.

Ask: - What does this character avoid? - What situations strain them quickly? - What kinds of solutions are outside their reach?

Limits are not flaws to be compensated for.

They are promises about how pressure will land.

20.5 Establish a Risk Profile

Every character has a **risk profile**.

This describes: - Where instability is likely to appear first - What kinds of pressure accumulate fastest

Two characters may share a capability domain but have different risk profiles.

One may burn out.

Another may become reckless.

Neither is safer.

They are strained differently.

20.6 Name Initial Capabilities

Capabilities are recorded as **plain-language statements**.

They explain *why* an action is feasible.

Examples: - Experienced Pathfinder - Trained Court Negotiator - Familiar with Pre-Collapse Relics

Capabilities are not ratings.

They do not protect the character from consequence.

Canonical reminder:

Capabilities expand feasibility; they never bypass consequence.

20.7 Characters Begin Stable, Not Empty

New characters do not begin under extreme pressure.

They begin: - Stable - Competent within their domain - Capable of making meaningful choices

Pressure and instability are introduced through play, not backstory penalties.

20.8 Growth Is Directional, Not Accumulative

Character growth in Manifold is not about gaining more options indefinitely.

Growth: - Deepens existing domains - Hardens capabilities - Narrows as much as it expands

Early character creation should include a **growth direction**: - What the character is likely to become better at - What flexibility may be lost along the way

This prepares the table for change.

20.9 What You Do *Not* Choose

At character creation, you do **not** choose: - Numerical attributes - Power levels - Balanced roles - Advancement tracks

These concepts are incompatible with Manifold's design.

If you find yourself reaching for them, return to constraint and state.

20.10 Recording the Character

A character's starting information is recorded on a **State Sheet**.

Initially, this will be sparse.

As play continues, the character's state will evolve through: - Pressure - Instability - Collapse - Growth and hardening

The sheet changes as the character does.

20.11 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be able to:

- Bring a character into play without statistics
- Establish meaningful limits from the start
- Understand how pressure will affect the character
- See growth as a consequence of play, not a reward track

You are not finishing a character.

You are **placing them into motion**.

Next: Act V – Chapter I explores how special capabilities interact with feasibility and pressure once play begins.

21 Act V – Chapter I: Special Capabilities and Feasibility

Up to this point, everything in the manual has applied to *ordinary action*.

Act V addresses a common pressure point for GMs:

What about magic, advanced technology, supernatural powers, or exceptional training?

This chapter explains how **special capabilities** fit into Manifold without breaking the system's core assumptions.

21.1 Special Capabilities Are Not Exceptions

Magic, technology, powers, and unique techniques do not sit outside the rules of play.

They do not: - Override pressure - Bypass consequence - Grant automatic success

Instead, special capabilities **change feasibility**.

They expand *what can be attempted*, not what is guaranteed.

21.2 Feasibility Comes Before Resolution

Before uncertainty is considered, the table answers a simple question:

Is this something that could reasonably be attempted right now?

Special capabilities primarily affect this question.

They explain *why* an action might be feasible when it otherwise would not be.

They do not decide: - How well it goes - What it costs - Whether it is safe
Those questions are answered later.

21.3 Capability Is a Justification, Not a Shield

When a player invokes a special capability, they are making an argument:

“This should be possible because...”

That argument may reference: - Training - Equipment - Ritual preparation - Innate traits - Prior actions or sacrifices

Your role is not to approve or deny powers.

Your role is to assess whether the justification makes sense *in this situation*.

21.4 The Feasibility Statement

A useful way to frame special actions is:

“I am attempting X by means of Y, because Z.”

Where: - **X** is the intent - **Y** is the method or capability - **Z** is the justification grounded in the fiction

If any part of this is unclear, pause and clarify.

Clear feasibility prevents later disagreement.

21.5 Special Capabilities Do Not Remove Risk

Making something possible does not make it safe.

In fact, special capabilities often: - Increase pressure - Generate instability - Attract attention - Narrow margins for error

Powerful methods tend to be **loud, costly, or volatile**.

This is not balance.

It is consequence.

21.6 Feasibility Can Be Conditional

An action may be feasible *only if* certain conditions are met.

Examples include: - Proper preparation - Specific tools or materials - Adequate time - A stable environment

If conditions are missing, say so explicitly.

Players may then choose whether to proceed anyway, delay, or change approach.

21.7 Feasibility Can Change Over Time

Feasibility is not fixed.

As pressure and instability accumulate: - Some capabilities become harder to use - Others become riskier - Some may become temporarily unavailable

Likewise, recovery, preparation, or stabilization can restore feasibility.

This keeps powerful options grounded in the evolving situation.

21.8 Avoid Ability Lists

Do not reduce special capabilities to exhaustive lists.

Lists encourage: - Permission-seeking - Rules-lawyering - Edge-case exploitation

Manifold works best when capabilities are: - Described narratively - Applied situationally - Interpreted cooperatively

If a capability can be reduced to a checkbox, it is probably too narrow.

21.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Treating special capabilities as feasibility arguments
- Allowing extraordinary actions without granting immunity
- Letting power increase cost and pressure
- Saying “possible, but risky” instead of “yes” or “no”

You are not adjudicating powers.

You are maintaining coherence.

Next: Act V – Chapter II explores how special capabilities interact with pressure, instability, and long-term consequence.

22 Act V – Chapter II: Capabilities Under Pressure

In the previous chapter, you learned how special capabilities affect **feasibility**.

This chapter explains what happens when those capabilities are used repeatedly, recklessly, or under strain.

Special capabilities do not float above the system.

They accumulate **pressure** like everything else—and often faster.

22.1 Power Accelerates Pressure

Extraordinary capabilities tend to: - Consume scarce resources - Draw attention - Stress fragile systems - Narrow margins for error

This means that while they expand what is possible, they often **accelerate pressure accumulation**.

Power is not free.

It shifts where strain appears.

22.2 Capabilities Do Not Ignore Context

A capability that works cleanly in one situation may be unstable in another.

Factors that commonly affect capabilities include: - Environmental conditions - Emotional or mental strain - Incomplete preparation - Existing instability

As pressure builds, capabilities that once felt reliable may become volatile.

This is not a malfunction.

It is the system responding honestly.

22.3 Repeated Use Narrows Outcomes

Using the same powerful method repeatedly tends to: - Remove clean outcome tiers - Increase collateral consequences - Make failure modes harsher

This does not mean the capability stops working.

It means the **Outcome Space becomes riskier** each time it is relied upon without relief.

22.4 Instability Changes How Capabilities Behave

When instability is present, special capabilities often: - Become harder to control - Produce side effects - Spill consequences beyond their target

A spell may still function. A device may still activate. A technique may still apply.

What changes is *containment*.

22.5 Capabilities Can Create New Instability

Some capabilities are inherently destabilizing.

Examples include: - Reality-warping effects - High-energy technology - Powers that bypass natural limits

Using such capabilities may: - Introduce new instability immediately - Convert pressure directly into volatility

This should be visible and expected, not surprising.

22.6 Degradation Is Directional, Not Binary

Capabilities rarely flip from “working” to “broken.”

More often, they degrade by: - Losing precision - Increasing cost - Becoming slower or louder - Requiring more setup or support

Directional degradation keeps capabilities usable while making consequences legible.

22.7 Recovery Restores Reliability

Pressure and instability affect capabilities because they affect the situation.

Recovery, stabilization, and downtime can: - Restore lost reliability - Reopen safer outcome tiers - Reduce collateral effects

This reinforces that powerful tools benefit from care, pacing, and restraint.

22.8 Avoid Immunity Thinking

No capability should be immune to pressure or instability.

If a power consistently: - Avoids consequence - Produces clean outcomes regardless of context - Bypasses accumulated strain

Then it is undermining the system's core assumptions.

Reframe it as affecting feasibility, not outcome.

22.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Letting power accelerate pressure
- Degrading capabilities without invalidating them
- Making instability visible in extraordinary effects
- Rewarding care and recovery over repetition

You are not weakening powerful abilities.

You are letting them leave a footprint.

Next: Act V – Chapter III explores how special capabilities grow, change, or harden over time through use and consequence.

23 Act V – Chapter III: Capability Growth and Hardening

So far in this act, you have seen how special capabilities affect feasibility, and how they accumulate pressure and instability through use.

This chapter explains how capabilities **change over time**.

In Manifold, growth is not about becoming numerically stronger. It is about becoming **more defined**—and sometimes more constrained.

23.1 Capabilities Grow Through Use

Capabilities change because they are used.

Repeated action under pressure tends to: - Clarify what a capability is good at - Expose where it is fragile - Establish patterns of consequence

Growth is not a reward granted by the system.

It is an accumulation of history.

23.2 Growth Is Directional, Not Upward

Capabilities do not improve in all directions at once.

As a capability grows, it often: - Becomes more reliable in familiar situations - Becomes less flexible outside its niche - Develops characteristic risks or side effects

This is not a tradeoff imposed for balance.

It is specialization emerging naturally.

23.3 Capability Growth Is Contextual

A capability grows in response to *how* it is used.

For example: - A ritual used under time pressure may grow faster but become unstable - A technique practiced carefully may become precise but slow - A device pushed past limits may become powerful but brittle

There is no universal growth path.

The fiction determines the direction.

23.4 Hardening Is Growth That Narrows

Sometimes, growth crosses into **hardening**.

Hardening occurs when a capability: - Loses flexibility - Becomes bound to specific conditions - Develops irreversible constraints

A hardened capability is not weaker.

It is *less adaptable*.

23.5 Hardening Comes From Unrelieved Pressure

Hardening most often results from: - Repeated use without recovery - Operating under sustained instability - Accepting partial stabilization as permanent

In other words, hardening is pressure that has been lived with long enough to become normal.

23.6 Growth and Cost Are Linked

As capabilities grow or harden, they often: - Demand more preparation - Carry clearer side effects - Impose sharper consequences on failure

This keeps growth grounded in play.

Capabilities become *distinct*, not free.

23.7 Growth Does Not Require Tracking Trees

You do not need advancement tables or ability trees.

Growth can be represented by: - Changes in feasibility arguments - Shifts in available outcome tiers - New or altered instability patterns - Modified conditions for safe use

If growth is visible in play, it is working.

23.8 Let Players Shape Growth

Players should have influence over how their capabilities evolve.

They do this by: - Choosing when and how to rely on a capability - Accepting certain costs over others - Deciding when to rest, stabilize, or push

Growth emerges from decision, not optimization.

23.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Letting capabilities specialize through use
- Allowing pressure to harden abilities over time
- Representing growth through changed feasibility and consequence
- Supporting advancement without numbers or levels

You are not awarding upgrades.

You are letting history leave its mark.

Next: Act V – Chapter IV introduces items, tools, and gear as shared capabilities with their own pressure and instability.

24 Act V – Chapter IV: Items, Tools, and Shared Capabilities

Up to this point, Act V has focused on **capabilities that belong to characters**.

This chapter extends the same principles to **items, tools, and gear**—capabilities that are *external*, *shared*, and often *transferable*.

Items are not bonuses.

They are **infrastructure**.

24.1 Items Are Shared Capabilities

An item is best understood as a capability that: - Does not belong to a single character - Can be used by multiple people - Persists independently of who is holding it

This means items: - Affect feasibility - Accumulate pressure - Can develop instability

Just like personal capabilities.

24.2 Items Change What Can Be Attempted

An item's primary role is to expand feasibility.

A tool may: - Make an action possible at all - Make it safer, faster, or more precise - Allow action at a distance or scale

It does **not**: - Guarantee success - Remove consequence - Replace judgment

Using an item is an argument for *why* something can be attempted.

24.3 Items Carry Their Own Pressure

Items accumulate strain through use.

Common sources of item pressure include: - Wear and fatigue - Overextension - Improvised or unintended use - Operating outside design conditions

This pressure belongs to the item, not the user.

Switching hands does not reset strain.

24.4 Item Instability Is Visible

When an item becomes unstable, it should be obvious.

Examples include: - Unreliable function - Side effects or leakage - Increased setup time - Reduced precision or control

If an item is unstable but appears to function normally, players cannot reason about risk.

Visibility is essential.

24.5 Items Can Be Points of Failure

Because items are shared, their instability often: - Affects multiple characters - Cascades into wider situations - Creates communal risk

This is not a flaw.

It is what makes infrastructure meaningful.

24.6 Maintenance Is Stabilization

Caring for items is not flavor.

Maintenance is a form of **stabilization**.

It may include: - Repair - Calibration - Restocking - Ritual renewal

Maintenance consumes time, attention, and resources.

That cost is what restores reliability.

24.7 Items Can Harden

Like personal capabilities, items can harden.

Examples of hardening include: - Becoming specialized for a narrow use - Losing adaptability - Requiring specific conditions or handlers

A hardened item is not broken.

It is *committed*.

24.8 Avoid Item Lists and Modifiers

Do not reduce items to static lists of bonuses.

Lists encourage: - Optimization over reasoning - Treating gear as math - Ignoring consequence

Instead, represent items by: - What they make feasible - What strain they carry - How they fail when pushed

If an item's meaning cannot be expressed fictionally, it is probably too abstract.

24.9 Shared Responsibility

Because items are shared: - Decisions about their use affect everyone - Neglect has communal consequences - Care benefits the group

This encourages coordination rather than hoarding.

24.10 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Treating items as shared capabilities
- Letting gear accumulate pressure and instability
- Making item failure visible and traceable
- Using maintenance as meaningful stabilization

You are not handing out equipment.

You are managing infrastructure.

Next: Act VI begins by addressing how groups, factions, and environments operate under the same pressure and instability principles.

25 Act VI – Chapter I: Groups, Factions, and Collective Action

So far, the manual has focused on **individual characters**, **their capabilities**, and the **tools** they rely on.

Act VI expands the same principles to a larger scale.

This chapter explains how **groups**, **factions**, and **communities** function in Manifold—and how collective action follows the same rules of pressure, instability, and consequence.

25.1 Groups Are Not Characters

Groups do not think, feel, or act the way individuals do.

They have: - Internal divisions - Conflicting priorities - Uneven capability distribution - Slower response times

Treating a group as a single “character” hides these realities.

Instead, groups are best understood as **structures under strain**.

25.2 Collective Action Is Coordinated Feasibility

When a group acts, it is not making one large action.

It is coordinating many smaller actions toward a shared aim.

This means collective action depends on: - Alignment of intent - Communication capacity - Organizational stability - Available infrastructure

A powerful group with poor coordination may act less effectively than a small, aligned one.

25.3 Groups Have Capabilities

Groups possess capabilities just as individuals do.

Examples include: - Mobilizing people quickly - Controlling territory - Gathering information - Enforcing norms or laws

These capabilities: - Expand feasibility - Accumulate pressure - Can become unstable

They are shaped by history and use.

25.4 Group Pressure Builds Internally and Externally

Pressure on a group comes from many sources:

Internal pressure may include: - Resource shortages - Leadership conflict - Morale strain - Procedural overload

External pressure may include: - Political threats - Environmental danger - Public scrutiny - Competing factions

Both kinds matter.

Ignoring internal pressure is a common GM mistake.

25.5 Instability Manifests as Fracture

When group pressure collapses into instability, it often appears as: - Splintering factions - Breakdown of command - Unreliable enforcement - Sudden defections

Group instability rarely looks like total collapse at first.

It looks like **inconsistency**.

25.6 Groups Change Outcome Spaces Broadly

Group state reshapes Outcome Spaces at scale.

For example: - A stable faction may keep clean negotiation tiers available - An unstable one may make violence more likely - A pressured institution may trade speed for control

Group condition affects *everyone* interacting with it.

25.7 Collective Action Is Slow to Stabilize

Stabilizing a group takes longer than stabilizing an individual.

It often requires: - Structural reform - Redistribution of resources - Changes in leadership - Shifts in culture or policy

Quick fixes may relieve symptoms but leave causes intact.

25.8 Players Can Act Through Groups

Player characters may: - Influence groups - Lead factions - Exploit internal divisions - Attempt reform or sabotage

These actions should: - Accumulate pressure - Risk instability - Create lasting change

Group-level consequences should persist beyond a single scene.

25.9 Representing Groups Simply

You do not need complex organizational sheets.

Represent groups by: - What they can reliably do - Where they are under strain - What would fracture them if pushed

If those three things are clear, the group is usable in play.

25.10 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Treating groups as pressure-bearing structures
- Letting collective action succeed or fail unevenly
- Using instability to model fracture rather than collapse
- Applying all prior principles at a larger scale

You are not simulating organizations.

You are modeling **strain and coordination**.

Next: Act VI – Chapter II explores environments, locations, and regions as systems under pressure.

26 Act VI – Chapter II: Environments, Locations, and Regions

Act VI continues to scale the system outward.

After groups and factions, this chapter addresses **environments, locations, and regions**—places that exert pressure, accumulate instability, and shape action without acting as opponents.

Places in Manifold are not static backdrops.

They are **systems under strain**.

26.1 Environments Apply Pressure

Every location exerts pressure simply by existing.

Environmental pressure may come from: - Terrain and weather - Infrastructure decay - Crowding or isolation - Scarcity of shelter, water, or power

This pressure is not hostile intent.

It is the cost of operating in that place.

26.2 Locations Remember Use and Neglect

Places change based on how they are treated.

Repeated action in a location may: - Wear down safety margins - Increase surveillance or attention
- Deplete local resources - Destabilize social or ecological balance

A location that has been pushed hard should not feel the same on return.

That difference *is* the memory of play.

26.3 Environmental Pressure Is Often Ambient

Unlike conflict, environmental pressure rarely spikes suddenly.

It tends to: - Accumulate quietly - Constrain options gradually - Reveal itself through reduced reliability

Examples include: - Equipment failing more often in harsh conditions - Travel becoming slower or riskier - Safe shelter becoming scarce

If the environment only matters during dramatic moments, it is underused.

26.4 Instability Appears as Hazard and Unreliability

When environmental pressure collapses into instability, it often appears as: - Structural failure - Unpredictable hazards - Cascading breakdowns - Sudden loss of safe routes or refuges

Environmental instability should feel *plausible*, not theatrical.

Players should recognize the warning signs in hindsight.

26.5 Locations Shape Outcome Spaces

Where an action occurs matters.

The same intent attempted in different environments may: - Offer different outcome tiers - Carry different costs - Remove or enable certain approaches

A stable location may preserve clean options.

An unstable one may make messiness unavoidable.

26.6 Regions Are Systems of Systems

A region is not just a large location.

It is a collection of: - Environments - Groups - Infrastructure - Flows of people, goods, and information

Regional pressure often emerges from interactions between these systems.

Treat regions as **patterns of strain**, not as maps with numbers.

26.7 Travel Is Environmental Interaction

Movement through space is not neutral.

Travel: - Consumes resources - Exposes characters to pressure - Accumulates fatigue and risk

Even when nothing interrupts travel, pressure may still build.

Traversal Play exists to express this without over-resolution.

26.8 Players Can Change Environments

Environments are not immutable.

Players may: - Stabilize dangerous areas - Exploit fragile ones - Redirect pressure elsewhere - Abandon locations entirely

These choices should leave lasting marks.

A stabilized place should feel different.

26.9 Representing Environments Simply

You do not need environmental stat blocks.

A location is playable if you know: - What operating there costs - Where it is strained - What would fail if pushed

If those answers are clear, the environment will behave consistently.

26.10 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Treating places as pressure-bearing systems
- Letting environments accumulate history
- Using instability to model hazard and decay

- Making location matter without turning it into an antagonist

You are not simulating ecology.

You are expressing **constraint and wear**.

Next: Act VI – Chapter III turns inward again, focusing on how the GM prepares, frames, and sustains play over time.

27 Act VI – Chapter III: GM Preparation, Framing, and Continuity

This chapter turns inward.

After scaling outward to groups and environments, we now focus on **how you prepare, frame, and sustain play** as a GM—without pre-plotting, exhaustive notes, or carrying the game alone.

Preparation in Manifold is not about prediction.

It is about **readiness**.

27.1 Preparation Is About Pressure, Not Plot

You do not prepare stories.

You prepare: - Situations under strain - Pressures that are building - Instabilities that may emerge

A good preparation question is:

What is being pushed, neglected, or stretched right now?

If you know that, you are ready.

27.2 Prepare Questions, Not Answers

Manifold play thrives on open questions.

Useful preparation questions include: - What happens if this pressure is ignored? - Who benefits if this stabilizes—and who loses? - What breaks first if this is pushed harder?

Do not decide the answers in advance.

Let play determine them.

27.3 Framing Scenes Around Strain

When you frame a scene, orient the table around **what is strained**.

Good framing establishes: - What matters right now - What is under pressure - What could change as a result

Avoid framing scenes around objectives alone.

Objectives matter because of what they strain or relieve.

27.4 Continuity Comes From State

Continuity in Manifold is not maintained by notes about plot.

It is maintained by: - Remembering what is under pressure - Tracking what has become unstable - Preserving what has hardened into lasting change

If state is coherent, continuity follows naturally.

27.5 Use Recaps to Surface Strain

Session recaps should emphasize: - What pressure increased - What instability appeared or worsened - What was stabilized or abandoned

This keeps everyone oriented toward consequence rather than events.

A recap that lists scenes but ignores strain loses meaning.

27.6 Between Sessions, Simplify

Between sessions is the best time to simplify state.

Useful maintenance includes: - Collapsing multiple pressures into one - Removing resolved or irrelevant instability - Clarifying what has hardened into a new baseline

If you carry too much state forward, future decisions become muddy.

27.7 Do Not Pre-Solve Player Problems

Avoid preparing solutions.

If you catch yourself thinking: - “They will probably do X” - “This is how they should fix it”

Stop.

Your job is to present strain honestly, not to imagine resolutions.

27.8 Trust the System’s Memory

Manifold remembers through pressure and instability.

You do not need to force callbacks or escalate artificially.

If something was strained and left unresolved, it will return naturally.

Let the system do that work.

27.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Preparing situations instead of plots
- Framing scenes around strain and consequence
- Maintaining continuity through state
- Simplifying between sessions without losing meaning

You are not planning stories.

You are tending a living system.

Next: Act VII introduces the concrete tools—tracks, tags, and notation—that make state easy to see and reason about at the table.

28 Act VII – Chapter I: Making State Visible

Up to this point, you have learned to *think* in terms of state, pressure, and instability.

Act VII begins the shift from concept to practice.

This chapter explains **why state must be visible**, and what “visibility” actually means in Manifold.

Before introducing specific tools, it is critical to understand their purpose.

28.1 State Is the Memory of the World

In Manifold, state is how the game remembers.

State captures: - What has changed - What is strained - What is unstable - What has become permanent

Without visible state, the world forgets.

When the world forgets, consequence collapses into improvisation.

28.2 Visibility Is About Shared Understanding

Making state visible does **not** mean writing everything down.

It means: - Everyone knows what is currently true - Everyone can reason from the same information
- No one is surprised by consequences that had no warning

Visibility supports cooperation.

Hidden state creates mistrust.

Whether a State Sheet is fully public, partially shared, or kept private is a physical choice at the table, not a mechanical one.

Visibility is controlled by where the sheet is placed and who can see it—not by special rules.

28.3 The GM Is Not the Only Memory

Manifold does not expect you to hold the entire game in your head.

Visible state: - Offloads cognitive burden - Allows players to plan meaningfully - Makes shared reasoning possible

If players cannot see state, they cannot engage fully with consequence.

In Manifold, visible state is usually gathered onto a shared artifact called a **State Sheet**.

You do not need to understand how State Sheets work yet. For now, it is enough to know that **all persistent state—characters, factions, locations, and situations—ultimately lives in one visible place**, rather than being scattered across notes, sheets, or subsystems.

28.4 What Deserves to Be Visible

Not all information needs representation.

State should be made visible when it is: - Persistent - Relevant to future decisions - Likely to shape Outcome Spaces

Ephemeral details belong in description.

Persistent strain belongs in state.

28.5 Visibility Is Directional, Not Precise

State visibility does not require precision.

You are not tracking exact values.

You are communicating: - Direction (worsening, stabilizing, hardening) - Scope (who or what is affected) - Salience (what matters right now)

If the direction is clear, precision is unnecessary.

28.6 Visible State Enables Fairness

Manifold does not enforce fairness through balance.

It enforces fairness through **traceability**.

When state is visible: - Players can see risk accumulating - Consequences feel earned - Harsh outcomes make sense in hindsight

Opacity is what makes outcomes feel arbitrary.

28.7 Visibility Is Ongoing

State visibility is not a setup step.

It is maintained continuously through: - Marking new strain - Updating instability - Removing resolved elements - Simplifying over time

If visible state never changes, it is not doing its job.

28.8 Do Not Over-Represent

Too much representation is as harmful as too little.

Over-representation: - Dilutes meaning - Increases cognitive load - Discourages engagement

Only represent what the table needs to reason forward.

Everything else can remain implicit.

In practice, this is handled by creating a new version of a State Sheet and carrying forward only what still matters.

28.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should understand:

- Why visible state is essential
- What kinds of information deserve representation
- How visibility supports fairness and cooperation
- Why precision is less important than clarity
- You know where state will live, even before learning how to record it

You are not building a model.

You are maintaining a shared memory.

Next: Act VII – Chapter II introduces tracks as a simple way to represent persistent pressure and change.

29 Act VII – Chapter II: Tracks

In the previous chapter, you learned *why* state must be visible and where it will live.

This chapter introduces the simplest tool for representing change over time: **tracks**.

Tracks do not measure success.

They make **directional change** visible.

29.1 What a Track Is

A **track** is a visual representation of persistent change.

It shows: - That something is changing - Which direction it is moving - How close it is to a meaningful transition

Tracks do **not** explain why change is happening.

They show that it is.

29.2 Tracks Represent Trajectory, Not Quantity

Tracks are not meters.

They do not require precise increments, math, or optimization.

A track answers questions like: - “Is this getting worse or better?” - “Are we approaching a breaking point?” - “Has something meaningfully shifted?”

Exact amounts are unnecessary.

Direction is what matters.

29.3 What Deserves a Track

Use a track when a change is: - Persistent - Likely to matter later - Capable of reaching a threshold

Common examples include: - Building pressure - Spreading instability - Long-term recovery - Escalating attention or exposure

If a change resolves immediately, it does not need a track.

29.4 Tracks Are Situation-Scoped

A track belongs to a **situation**, not a roll.

It may apply to: - A character - A group or faction - A location or region - A shared problem

What matters is that the scope is clear.

If players cannot tell *what the track affects*, it is underspecified.

29.5 Tracks Move in Meaningful Steps

You advance a track only when something *meaningful* happens.

Avoid advancing tracks for: - Routine actions - Minor inconveniences - Colorful but inconsequential moments

Advancing a track should signal: > “*This situation is now meaningfully different.*”

29.6 Thresholds Matter More Than Length

The most important part of a track is not how long it is.

It is what happens at its **thresholds**.

A threshold marks: - Collapse into instability - Loss of a safe option - A point of no easy return - A forced change in approach

You do not need many thresholds.

You need *clear* ones.

29.7 Tracks Do Not Dictate Outcomes

Reaching a threshold does not resolve a situation by itself.

It changes what is possible next.

Tracks: - Shape Outcome Spaces - Remove or alter tiers - Increase cost or risk

They never narrate events on their own.

29.8 Multiple Tracks Can Coexist

A single situation may have several tracks.

For example: - One for pressure - One for attention - One for structural integrity

Do not merge unrelated changes into a single track.

If tracks blur together, meaning is lost.

29.9 Simplify Tracks Aggressively

Tracks should be short-lived.

When a track: - Reaches a threshold - Is stabilized - Loses relevance

Remove it.

If its effects persist, represent those effects directly instead of keeping the track.

29.10 Tracks Live on the State Sheet

Tracks are recorded on the **current State Sheet**.

When the sheet is replaced: - Only active tracks are carried forward - Resolved tracks are left behind

This prevents invisible history from controlling the present.

29.11 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Deciding when a change deserves a track

- Advancing tracks only on meaningful shifts
- Using thresholds to mark transitions
- Removing tracks once their work is done

You are not counting progress.

You are making change visible.

Next: Act VII – Chapter III introduces tags and conditions as a way to represent qualitative state that does not move along a track.

30 Act VII – Chapter III: Tags and Conditions

In the previous chapter, you learned how **tracks** represent change over time.

This chapter introduces a different kind of state: **tags and conditions**.

Where tracks show *movement*, tags and conditions show *qualities*.

They describe what is true *right now*.

30.1 What Tags and Conditions Are

Tags and **conditions** are short, descriptive markers that indicate persistent qualities of a situation.

They represent things that: - Are currently true - Shape feasibility and risk - Do not inherently move toward a threshold

Examples include: - “Alerted” - “Fragile” - “Unstable Ground” - “Politically Sensitive”

They exist until something meaningfully changes them.

30.2 Tags Describe, Conditions Constrain

While tags and conditions are closely related, they serve slightly different purposes.

Tags: - Describe notable features - Provide context - Signal what should be considered

Conditions: - Actively constrain action - Remove or alter outcome tiers - Increase cost or risk

The distinction is practical, not mechanical.

Use whichever term best communicates *impact*.

30.3 Tags and Conditions Are Qualitative

Tags and conditions are written in plain language.

They do not: - Carry numeric values - Imply bonuses or penalties - Encode hidden rules

Their meaning comes from shared understanding of the fiction.

If a tag requires explanation every time it appears, it is too vague.

30.4 When to Use a Tag Instead of a Track

Use a tag or condition when: - A change is significant but not directional - Something is true until addressed - You need to mark a constraint without implying escalation

For example: - A door is “Barricaded” - A faction is “Fractured” - A character is “Exhausted”

If you expect the situation to *move toward collapse*, use a track instead.

30.5 Tags Shape Outcome Spaces

Tags and conditions matter because they: - Affect feasibility - Remove clean options - Introduce tradeoffs

They shape Outcome Spaces *before* dice are rolled.

A tag does not decide what happens.

It decides what kinds of outcomes are even possible.

30.6 Tags Can Be Created or Removed by Play

Tags and conditions appear when: - Instability manifests - A threshold is crossed - An action leaves a lasting mark

They are removed when: - The situation is stabilized - The condition is addressed directly - The context changes enough that it no longer applies

Do not leave obsolete tags in place.

If a tag no longer matters, remove it.

30.7 Keep Tags Sparse and Legible

Too many tags dilute meaning.

As a guideline: - Prefer a few clear tags - Merge similar tags when possible - Remove tags that no longer shape decisions

If players stop referring to a tag, it is probably unnecessary.

30.8 Tags Live on the State Sheet

Tags and conditions are recorded on the **current State Sheet** alongside tracks.

They should: - Be visible - Be easy to reference - Clearly indicate scope

When a State Sheet is replaced, only relevant tags are carried forward.

30.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Using tags to describe persistent qualities
- Applying conditions to constrain feasibility
- Choosing tags instead of tracks when change is not directional
- Removing tags once they stop mattering

You are not labeling the world.

You are marking what must be respected.

Next: Act VII – Chapter IV explains how scope, collapse, and simplification work together to keep state manageable over time.

31 Act VII – Chapter IV: Scope, Collapse, and Simplification

By now, you have seen how **tracks**, **tags**, and **conditions** make state visible.

This chapter explains how that state stays **manageable over time**.

Manifold does not grow state endlessly.

It relies on three related practices: - **Scope** — where state applies - **Collapse** — when change becomes permanent - **Simplification** — how excess state is removed

31.1 Scope Is Always Explicit

Every piece of state has **scope**.

Scope answers the question:

What does this actually affect?

State may apply to: - A single character - A group or faction - A location or region - A specific situation or threat

If scope is unclear, state cannot be used correctly.

31.2 Narrow Scope Prevents Overreach

State should be scoped as narrowly as honesty allows.

Avoid: - Letting a local problem affect everything - Applying a condition beyond where it makes sense - Treating situational strain as global truth

Over-broad scope is one of the fastest ways state becomes oppressive or confusing.

31.3 Collapse Is a Meaningful Transition

Collapse occurs when ongoing change becomes a **new baseline**.

Examples include: - Pressure hardening into permanent damage - Instability becoming an accepted condition - A repeated cost turning into lasting loss

Collapse is not failure.

It is volatility settling into structure.

31.4 Collapse Replaces Tracks

When collapse occurs: - Remove the track - Replace it with a tag or condition - Update the fiction to reflect permanence

Tracks exist to show *movement*.

Once movement is over, the track has done its job.

31.5 Not All Tracks Must Collapse

Some tracks: - Resolve cleanly - Are stabilized - Become irrelevant

These tracks should simply be removed.

Do not force collapse where none makes sense.

If nothing lasting changed, no permanent state is required.

31.6 Simplification Is Ongoing Maintenance

Simplification is not a special phase.

It happens whenever: - A State Sheet is replaced - A session ends - A situation changes significantly

Ask: - What still matters? - What no longer shapes decisions? - What can be merged or removed?

31.7 Merge State Aggressively

Multiple pieces of state that point in the same direction should be merged.

For example: - Several minor pressures may become one dominant strain - Multiple related tags may collapse into a single condition

Merging increases clarity.

It does not erase meaning.

31.8 Collapse Prevents Hidden Escalation

Without collapse and simplification, state can quietly escalate.

Old tracks linger.

Obsolete tags remain.

The world becomes harsher without anyone noticing why.

Active simplification prevents this drift.

31.9 State Lives in the Present

Only **current** state shapes Outcome Spaces.

Archived State Sheets: - Provide context - Support reflection - Explain how things came to be

They do not: - Dictate feasibility - Justify outcome shaping - Override present conditions

If it is not on the current State Sheet, it is not active state.

31.10 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Scoping state so it applies only where it should
- Collapsing ongoing change into permanent conditions
- Removing or merging state without losing meaning
- Keeping the State Sheet legible over long play

You are not preserving every detail.

You are preserving what matters *now*.

Next: Act VII – Chapter V introduces roll gating and how visible state determines when dice are allowed to enter play.

32 Act VII – Chapter V: Roll Gating and State

By now, you have tools for making state visible.

This chapter explains how visible state determines **when dice are allowed to enter play**.

This is called **roll gating**.

Roll gating is not about restricting players.

It is about ensuring that dice are only used when uncertainty is real, meaningful, and already shaped by the situation.

32.1 Dice Never Act Alone

In Manifold, dice never operate in isolation.

A roll is only permitted when: - Intent is clear - Possible outcomes are defined - The Outcome Space has been shaped - State makes more than one outcome genuinely possible

If any of these are missing, do not roll.

32.2 State Is the Gate

Visible state is what opens or closes the gate to rolling.

Tracks, tags, and conditions: - Remove clean outcomes - Introduce risk or cost - Narrow or distort control

When state makes the outcome obvious, dice are unnecessary.

When state makes multiple outcomes viable, dice may be appropriate.

32.3 Roll Gating Is Not Difficulty Setting

You are not adjusting difficulty by allowing or denying rolls.

You are recognizing whether uncertainty still exists.

If state has already determined the outcome: - Do not roll to confirm it - Do not roll to soften it

Let the consequence stand.

32.4 When a Roll Is Blocked

A roll is blocked when: - Only one outcome tier remains available - Feasibility is absent - Instability guarantees loss of control

In these cases, the situation resolves through narration and consequence, not chance.

Blocking a roll is not denial.

It is honesty.

32.5 When a Roll Is Required

A roll is required when: - Multiple outcome tiers remain viable - The difference between them matters - State does not already decide which one occurs

Rolling too early bypasses state.

Rolling too late ignores uncertainty.

32.6 Roll Gating Preserves Traceability

Roll gating ensures that: - Outcomes can be traced to prior choices - Pressure and instability matter
- Dice never override history

When players ask “*Why did this go so badly?*”, the answer should be visible on the State Sheet.

32.7 Do Not Retroactively Gate

Never decide whether a roll should have happened *after* seeing the result.

If you realize: - A roll was premature - State was overlooked - Outcomes were underspecified

Pause, correct the structure, and roll again if needed.

Do not force a result to stand on a broken gate.

32.8 Communicating the Gate

When denying or allowing a roll, explain your reasoning in terms of state:

- “There’s no roll here—the instability makes this uncontrollable.”
- “You can roll, but the clean tier is gone.”
- “Nothing is stopping this; it just happens.”

This keeps the process transparent and collaborative.

32.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Using visible state to decide when to roll
- Blocking rolls without adversarial tension
- Requiring rolls only when uncertainty remains
- Explaining outcomes through traceable state

You are not controlling chance.

You are deciding when chance is allowed to speak.

Next: Act VIII turns to practical guidance on running sessions, handling table dynamics, and supporting long-term play.

33 Act VIII – Chapter I: Running the First Session

This chapter is practical.

You now understand how Manifold works. This chapter explains how to **begin play without over-preparing**, and how to guide the first session so the system's core ideas land naturally at the table.

Your goal in the first session is not mastery.

It is **orientation**.

33.1 What the First Session Is For

The first session establishes: - How attention moves - How state becomes visible - How pressure enters play - How judgment replaces procedure

It does **not** need to establish: - Long-term arcs - Full setting detail - Complete system fluency

If players leave understanding *how to think* in Manifold, the session succeeded.

33.2 Prepare Lightly

Before the first session, prepare only: - A starting situation under mild strain - One or two sources of pressure - A reason the characters are present

Do not prepare plots.

Do not prepare solutions.

Leave room for players to define what matters.

33.3 Introduce the State Sheet Early

Place a blank or lightly marked **State Sheet** where everyone can see it.

Explain only this:

“This is where we keep track of what currently matters.”

Do not explain tracks, tags, or roll gating yet.

Let the sheet exist as a shared reference before it becomes a tool.

33.4 Start in Free Play

Begin the session in **Free Play**.

Allow: - Conversation - Exploration - Low-stakes action

Use this time to: - Answer questions - Establish tone - Surface initial pressure quietly

Avoid early rolls.

Let players experience obvious action resolving cleanly.

33.5 Let Pressure Appear Gradually

Early pressure should be: - Understandable - Non-lethal - Recoverable

Examples include: - Time constraints - Limited resources - Social tension

Do not escalate immediately.

Let players notice strain before it matters.

33.6 Mark State Slowly

When something persists beyond the moment: - Add a simple note to the State Sheet - Keep language plain - Clarify scope aloud

Do not over-mark.

The first session should have *very little written state*.

33.7 Introduce Dice Sparingly

Call for a roll only when: - Intent is clear - Outcomes diverge meaningfully - State does not already decide the result

When you roll: - Explain what is being sampled - Name the available tiers - Resolve cleanly

One or two rolls in the first session is plenty.

33.8 Explain Through Play, Not Lecture

Avoid system explanations unless asked.

Instead: - Point to the State Sheet - Reference pressure or instability - Explain why a roll is or isn't happening

Players learn faster by seeing consequences than by hearing theory.

33.9 End with Visible Change

Try to end the first session with: - A marked pressure - A new condition - A changed situation

This reinforces that play leaves traces.

Even small changes matter.

33.10 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should feel ready to:

- Start play without system overload
- Trust judgment over procedure
- Use the State Sheet naturally
- Let pressure emerge at the table

You are not teaching a ruleset.

You are inviting players into a way of thinking.

Next: Act VIII – Chapter II addresses table communication, consent, and maintaining good-faith cooperative play.

34 Act VIII – Chapter II: Table Communication and Good-Faith Play

Manifold assumes **good-faith, cooperative play**.

This chapter explains how communication at the table supports that assumption—and what to do when clarity, trust, or alignment start to fray.

The system cannot replace conversation.

It is designed to *support* it.

34.1 Good-Faith Is the Foundation

Manifold only works when everyone is playing toward a shared goal:

To explore situations honestly and accept consequences together.

Good-faith play means: - No one is trying to “win” the system - No one is hiding intent for advantage
- No one treats ambiguity as a loophole

When good-faith is present, judgment feels fair.

When it is absent, no rule can fix that.

34.2 Say What You Are Doing

Clear communication starts with **declaring intent**.

Encourage players to say: - What they want to achieve - How they are attempting it - What they are willing to risk

Vague intent leads to mismatched expectations.

Specific intent makes consequence legible.

34.3 Ask Clarifying Questions Freely

As GM, you should ask questions like: - “What does success look like to you here?” - “What are you relying on to make that possible?” - “Are you trying to be careful or fast?”

These questions are not challenges.

They are how shared understanding is built.

34.4 Explain Your Judgments

When you make a call—about feasibility, pressure, or roll gating—explain it in terms of the situation.

For example: - “The pressure here removes the clean option.” - “This instability makes control unreliable.” - “There’s no roll because nothing is uncertain anymore.”

Transparency turns authority into trust.

34.5 Invite Correction

You are allowed to be wrong.

Encourage players to speak up if: - They misunderstood the situation - A judgment feels inconsistent - A piece of state was overlooked

Pause, correct, and continue.

Repairing misunderstanding is always better than pushing through it.

34.6 Disagreement Is About Understanding, Not Victory

When disagreements arise, treat them as: - Misaligned mental models - Missing information - Unstated assumptions

Do not treat them as challenges to authority.

Resolve disagreement by: - Restating intent - Reviewing visible state - Clarifying what is at stake

Most disputes disappear once everyone is reasoning from the same picture.

34.7 Avoid Adversarial Framing

The GM is not an opponent.

Players are not adversaries.

Avoid language like: - “You can’t do that” - “The rules say no”

Prefer: - “Here’s why that wouldn’t work right now” - “Here’s what the situation allows”

This keeps the focus on the world, not on permission.

34.8 Handle Uncertainty About Safety and Comfort

Good-faith play includes caring about the people at the table.

If someone expresses discomfort: - Pause immediately - Adjust the fiction - Remove or soften elements as needed

You do not need justification.

Maintaining trust matters more than any fictional outcome.

34.9 Reset When Needed

If tension builds or communication breaks down: - Call for a short pause - Restate shared goals - Re-anchor on visible state

A reset is not failure.

It is maintenance.

34.10 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should feel comfortable:

- Asking for clarity without defensiveness
- Explaining judgments transparently
- Treating disagreement as misalignment, not conflict
- Maintaining trust through communication

You are not enforcing rules.

You are sustaining a cooperative space.

Next: Act VIII – Chapter III focuses on pacing, spotlight, and sustaining momentum over long play.

35 Act VIII – Chapter III: Pacing, Spotlight, and Momentum

This chapter focuses on **flow**.

Manifold does not use turns, rounds, or fixed scene lengths to control pacing. Instead, pacing emerges from how attention, pressure, and consequence are handled at the table.

Your role is not to enforce tempo.

It is to **notice when attention should shift**.

35.1 Pacing Comes from Pressure

In Manifold, pace is primarily controlled by **pressure**, not by timekeeping.

When pressure is low: - Time can pass quickly - Details can be summarized - Play can move broadly

When pressure is high: - Time slows down - Intent becomes explicit - Consequences are resolved carefully

If pacing feels off, look to pressure first.

35.2 Use Play Modes to Regulate Speed

Play Modes already give you pacing tools.

- **Free Play** accelerates time
- **Traversal Play** compresses extended activity
- **Focused Scene Play** slows play to the moment

Do not rush Focused Scenes.

Do not linger in Free Play when stakes are clear.

Let the mode do its job.

35.3 Spotlight Follows Consequence

Spotlight is not distributed evenly.

It flows toward: - Who is under pressure - Who is making consequential choices - Who is most exposed to risk right now

This means spotlight may shift rapidly.

That is healthy.

35.4 Watch for Spotlight Drift

Spotlight problems usually appear as: - One player acting repeatedly without consequence - Others becoming passive or disengaged - Decisions happening without shared attention

When this happens: - Shift focus to another source of pressure - Ask a different player what they are doing *now* - Surface consequences that demand response

Do not force equality.

Restore relevance.

35.5 Momentum Is About Resolution

Momentum comes from **things changing**.

Stalled play often means: - Uncertainty is being avoided - Pressure is not advancing - State is not being marked

When play stalls, ask: - “What happens if this is left unresolved?” - “Where is strain building?” - “What changes if time passes?”

Then act on the answer.

35.6 Avoid False Urgency

Do not manufacture urgency to speed play up.

Artificial countdowns, surprise threats, or sudden disasters: - Undermine traceability - Break trust - Flatten consequence

If urgency is needed, it should emerge from existing pressure.

If none exists, let play breathe.

35.7 Let Quiet Moments Matter

Not every moment needs tension.

Periods of low pressure: - Allow recovery - Enable reflection - Make escalation meaningful later

Resist the urge to constantly escalate.

Contrast is what gives pressure weight.

35.8 End Scenes with Change

When closing a scene, look for: - A new pressure - A resolved uncertainty - A shifted condition

Even small changes maintain momentum.

A scene that ends exactly where it began is rarely complete.

35.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should be comfortable:

- Letting pressure, not clocks, control pacing
- Allowing spotlight to follow consequence
- Recognizing and correcting stalled momentum
- Trusting contrast instead of constant urgency

You are not driving the game forward.

You are letting change pull it along.

Next: Act VIII – Chapter IV addresses handling mistakes, recovery, and learning the system through play.

36 Act VIII – Chapter IV: Handling Mistakes, Recovery, and Learning Through Play

No one runs Manifold perfectly.

This chapter explains how to handle mistakes, misjudgments, and uncertainty about the system itself—without breaking trust, momentum, or coherence.

Mistakes are not a failure of play.

They are part of how the system teaches itself.

36.1 Expect Imperfect Judgment

Manifold relies on judgment.

Judgment improves through use.

Early play will include: - Missed pressure - Overlooked instability - Rolls called too early or too late
- State that feels off in hindsight

This is normal.

Do not treat early missteps as system problems.

36.2 Pause and Correct Openly

When something feels wrong, stop.

Say it plainly:

“I think we missed something.”

Then: - Restate intent - Review visible state - Adjust the situation if needed

Correction is not rewinding the story.

It is repairing shared understanding.

36.3 Fix Structure, Not Outcomes

When correcting a mistake: - Do not hunt for a different result - Do not soften consequences retroactively

Instead: - Fix the state - Reshape the Outcome Space - Re-roll only if uncertainty still exists

If the structure is sound, the outcome can stand.

36.4 Use Recovery as Learning

Recovery is part of play, not an apology.

When things go badly: - Let characters regroup - Allow stabilization - Give space for repair and reflection

Recovery teaches players: - How pressure is relieved - What stability costs - Which risks were worth taking

36.5 Learn One Concept at a Time

Do not try to apply the entire system at once.

Early sessions should prioritize: - Clear intent - Honest consequence - Visible state

If you forget a rule or tool, ignore it and continue.

Understanding will layer naturally.

36.6 Name Patterns as They Emerge

As play continues, you may notice patterns: - Repeated sources of pressure - Common failure modes
- Reliable ways players stabilize situations

Name these patterns aloud.

This helps the table develop a shared language without formal teaching.

36.7 Normalize Adjustment

You are allowed to say: - “We’re going to handle this differently going forward.” - “That was harsher than intended.” - “We missed how much pressure had built.”

Adjustment is maintenance, not correction.

36.8 Do Not Fear Inconsistency

Perfect consistency is impossible.

What matters is that decisions: - Make sense in context - Are explainable - Respect visible state

Players forgive inconsistency when reasoning is clear.

They resent opacity, not error.

36.9 What This Chapter Gives You

After this chapter, you should feel comfortable:

- Acknowledging and correcting mistakes openly
- Repairing structure without undoing play
- Using recovery as part of learning
- Letting understanding emerge through experience

You are not expected to master Manifold.

You are expected to **use it honestly**.

This concludes the core GM guidance. Appendices provide reference material and optional extensions.

37 Afterword: Readiness, Comparison, and What Comes Next

If you have read this far, you are ready to run Manifold.

Not because you have memorized procedures, but because you now understand **how to think with the system**.

This afterword exists to do three things: - Reassure you that you do not need perfection - Clarify how Manifold differs from other gaming platforms - Leave you oriented toward play, not preparation

37.1 You Are More Ready Than You Think

Manifold does not ask you to master rules before you begin.

It asks you to: - Notice what is under strain - Make that strain visible - Reason honestly about what follows

If you can do those three things, the rest will emerge through use.

Early sessions will be imperfect.

They should be.

Manifold is designed to **teach itself through play**.

37.2 How Manifold Differs from Traditional RPGs

Many roleplaying games organize play around: - Fixed actions - Success and failure - Balance and fairness through numbers

In those systems: - Dice judge outcomes - Characters are protected by mechanics - The world often reacts only when prompted

Manifold takes a different approach.

Here: - **State defines what is possible** - **Dice sample uncertainty instead of judging success** - **Pressure accumulates whether players engage it or not**

The world does not wait for optimal moments.

It continues to change.

37.3 How Manifold Differs from Narrative-First Games

Some narrative systems emphasize: - Story structure - Player authorship - Meta-currencies that steer outcomes

These tools can be powerful, but they often: - Abstract consequence - Blur the line between fiction and authority - Shift responsibility away from the shared world

Manifold keeps authorship grounded.

Here: - The world applies pressure - Players act within constraints - Outcomes emerge from interaction, not intent alone

No one decides what *should* happen.

Everyone discovers what *does* happen.

37.4 What Manifold Asks of You

Manifold does not ask you to be adversarial.

It does not ask you to be neutral.

It asks you to be **honest**.

Honest about: - What the world can support - What is strained or unstable - What consequences follow from action or neglect

Your authority comes from clarity, not control.

37.5 Trust the Tools, Then Let Them Fade

In early play, you will think consciously about: - Pressure - Tracks - Tags - Outcome Spaces

Over time, these will fade into intuition.

That is success.

When you no longer think about the tools, they are doing their job.

37.6 The Shape of Long-Term Play

As campaigns continue, you will notice: - State becoming simpler, not more complex - Old pressures hardening into the world - New situations emerging naturally

Manifold does not escalate endlessly.

It **settles**.

That settling is what gives history weight.

37.7 You Do Not Run Manifold Alone

Although the GM holds judgment authority, Manifold is not a solo burden.

Players: - Share responsibility for clarity - Reason from visible state - Help notice pressure and instability

The table thinks together.

That is the system's real strength.

37.8 What Comes Next

The best next step is simple:

Run a small, honest session.

Do not optimize it.

Do not test edge cases.

Put a situation under mild strain, make it visible, and see what happens.

The system will meet you there.

37.9 Final Words

Manifold is not about telling better stories.

It is about **building worlds that remember**.

If you: - Let state guide possibility - Let pressure shape choice - Let consequences stand

You will find that stories emerge on their own—earned, surprising, and durable.

You are ready.

Go play.

38 Appendix A: Canonical Vocabulary

This appendix defines the **canonical meanings** of key Manifold terms.

These definitions are authoritative. Other chapters may use metaphor or elaboration, but these entries describe how each term is meant to be understood and applied during play.

38.1 State

State is the persistent, visible information that defines what is currently possible.

State includes: - Ongoing pressure - Active instability - Relevant conditions - Available capabilities

Canonical principle:

State defines what is possible in the present.

Only current state has authority. History may inform judgment, but it does not dictate outcomes.

38.2 State Sheet

A **State Sheet** is the shared artifact where all active state is recorded.

It replaces character sheets, encounter notes, and many GM-only records with a single, visible surface.

Canonical principle:

Only what appears on the current State Sheet is active state.

Archived sheets may be kept for reference, but they have no mechanical authority.

38.3 Pressure

Pressure is accumulated strain caused by action, environment, or neglect.

Pressure is not opposition or intent.

Canonical principle:

Pressure is not opposition; it is strain created by acting in the world.

Pressure shapes risk and reliability over time.

38.4 Instability

Instability is a loss of reliability caused by accumulated pressure.

It represents volatility, not punishment.

Canonical principle:

Instability is the collapse of pressure into unreliability.

Instability makes control uncertain and outcomes messier.

38.5 Outcome Space

An **Outcome Space** is the set of outcomes that remain genuinely possible before a roll.

Outcome Spaces are shaped by state, not by dice.

Canonical principle:

Outcome Spaces are shaped before dice are rolled.

38.6 Outcome Tiers

Outcome Tiers are discrete categories of results within an Outcome Space.

They describe kinds of outcomes, not degrees of success or failure.

Tiers may be removed or distorted by pressure and instability.

38.7 Dice

Dice are a tool for sampling uncertainty.

They do not judge success, failure, or intent.

Canonical principle:

Dice sample uncertainty; they do not judge success or failure.

Dice never expand what is possible.

38.8 Roll Gating

Roll gating is the practice of allowing dice to enter play only when uncertainty genuinely remains.

State is what opens or closes the gate.

Canonical principle:

State is the gate that allows or blocks a roll.

38.9 Capability

A **capability** is a persistent trait that expands what actions are feasible.

Capabilities may belong to characters, groups, or items.

Canonical principle:

Capabilities expand feasibility; they never bypass consequence.

38.10 Feasibility

Feasibility describes whether an action can be attempted at all.

It does not describe likelihood or quality of outcome.

Canonical principle:

Feasibility determines whether an action can be attempted, not whether it succeeds.

38.11 Track

A **track** is a visual representation of directional change over time.

Tracks show trajectory toward a meaningful transition.

They do not measure progress or success.

38.12 Tag / Condition

A **tag** or **condition** is a qualitative marker that describes what is currently true.

Tags describe context.

Conditions constrain feasibility or outcomes.

They persist until meaningfully changed.

38.13 Scope

Scope defines what a piece of state applies to.

State may apply to a character, group, location, or situation.

If scope is unclear, state cannot be used correctly.

38.14 Collapse

Collapse is the moment when ongoing change becomes a permanent baseline.

Collapse replaces movement with structure.

Tracks are removed when collapse occurs.

38.15 Hardening

Hardening is when a capability becomes constrained, specialized, or less flexible due to repeated pressure.

Canonical distinction:

Collapse describes state settling into permanence; hardening describes capability losing flexibility.

38.16 Good-Faith Play

Good-faith play is cooperative engagement without adversarial optimization.

Players and GM act toward shared understanding and honest consequence.

Canonical principle:

Manifold assumes good-faith, cooperative play.

38.17 Judgment

Judgment is GM decision-making guided by visible state rather than rigid procedure.

The system supports judgment but does not replace it.

This appendix defines vocabulary, not procedure. When in doubt, return to these definitions and reason from visible state.

39 Appendix B: Examples and Reference

This appendix provides **illustrative examples** of Manifold in use.

These examples are not templates to follow exactly.

They exist to show how the concepts from the manual *look in practice*, how state is recorded, and how judgment is applied without rigid procedure.

These examples illustrate technique only. For a complete fantasy world implementation, see the Example Fantasy World in the World Building Guide.

39.1 How to Read These Examples

Each example shows: - A short fictional situation - The visible state at that moment - How the GM reasons from that state

They are intentionally incomplete.

Your table's situations will differ.

39.2 Example 1: A Simple Starting Situation

Situation: The characters arrive at a frontier settlement during a supply shortage.

Initial State Sheet (excerpt): - *Pressure:* Supply Shortage (early) - *Tag:* Isolated - *Tag:* Distrustful Locals

GM Reasoning: - The shortage creates background pressure, not immediate crisis - Isolation limits easy solutions - Distrust shapes negotiation outcomes

No rolls are required yet.

The state establishes tone and constraint without forcing action.

39.3 Example 2: Pressure Accumulating

Situation: The group attempts to secure supplies by negotiating with a local trader while time passes.

State Update: - *Pressure:* Supply Shortage advances - *Tag added:* Rumors Spreading

GM Reasoning: - Time spent negotiating increases exposure - Rumors introduce social risk

A roll may be allowed if outcomes diverge meaningfully.

The dice would sample *how negotiations go*, not whether they were attempted.

39.4 Example 3: Instability Appears

Situation: Negotiations break down publicly.

State Update: - *Pressure collapses into Instability:* Public Unrest - *Track removed* - *Condition added:* Hostile Crowd

GM Reasoning: - The situation is now volatile - Clean negotiation outcomes are gone - Control is unreliable

Future actions must account for instability.

39.5 Example 4: Using Tags Instead of Tracks

Situation: A character forces entry into a secured archive.

State Sheet (excerpt): - *Tag:* Alarmed - *Condition:* Restricted Access

GM Reasoning: - The alarm is significant but not escalating on its own - A track is unnecessary unless pursuit or escalation follows

The tags shape feasibility immediately.

39.6 Example 5: Roll Gating in Practice

Situation: A character attempts to calm the hostile crowd.

State Considerations: - Instability: Public Unrest - Condition: Hostile Crowd

GM Call: - A roll is allowed - The clean tier is unavailable - Loss of control is possible

Explanation to players: > “You can try, but this crowd is volatile. Even a good outcome won’t fully calm things.”

The roll samples uncertainty within a constrained Outcome Space.

39.7 Example 6: Collapse and Simplification

Situation: After several scenes, order is restored through force.

State Update: - Instability removed - *Condition added:* Martial Law - *Tag added:* Resentment

GM Reasoning: - The immediate crisis is over - Long-term consequences remain

The track and instability are gone.

Their effects persist as new state.

39.8 Example 7: Replacing a State Sheet

Situation: The settlement moves into a new phase of play.

New State Sheet includes: - *Condition:* Martial Law - *Tag:* Resource Rationing

Older sheets are archived.

Only current state remains active.

39.9 Using These Examples

These examples are not exhaustive.

They are meant to help you: - Visualize state changes - See how judgment replaces procedure - Understand when to roll and when not to

If your reasoning matches the spirit of these examples, you are using Manifold correctly.

39.10 Example 8: World and Player Tracks (Fantasy)

This example shows how **player-facing** and **world-facing** tracks can coexist on the same State Sheet without turning into meters or progress bars.

39.10.1 Situation

The characters are traveling through a border kingdom as tensions rise toward war.

They are low-level but already entangled with local power structures.

39.10.2 World Tracks

Pressure Track: Border Tensions - Direction: Rising - Scope: Regional - Threshold: Open Conflict

Pressure Track: Food Shortages - Direction: Worsening - Scope: Settlements - Threshold: Civil Unrest

GM Reasoning: - These tracks advance through time, neglect, or destabilizing actions - Players do not control them directly - They shape what kinds of outcomes remain available in the region

For example: - As Border Tensions rise, diplomacy outcomes narrow - As Food Shortages worsen, crowds become volatile

39.10.3 Player-Facing Tracks

Track: Party Fatigue - Direction: Accumulating - Scope: The group - Threshold: Exhaustion

Track: Wanted by the Crown - Direction: Escalating - Scope: Political / Legal - Threshold: Formal Bounty

GM Reasoning: - These tracks are affected directly by player choices - They communicate mounting cost rather than immediate failure - Thresholds signal forced changes in approach

For example: - High Fatigue removes clean travel outcomes - Escalating Wanted status blocks public action

39.10.4 Using Both Together

In play, these tracks interact:

- Rising Border Tensions make travel slower and riskier
- Party Fatigue increases the cost of detours
- Food Shortages amplify the danger of public unrest

No single track resolves the situation.

Together, they reshape the Outcome Space.

39.10.5 Simplification and Collapse

If war begins: - Border Tensions track is removed - *Condition added:* Active War

If the party rests and stabilizes: - Party Fatigue track is removed - Normal travel outcomes return
Only current state remains active.

39.10.6 Why This Works

- World tracks create pressure without targeting players
- Player tracks make cost visible without punishment
- Both remain legible and limited in number
- Thresholds change possibilities instead of ending play

This is the intended use of tracks in a fantasy context.

Additional examples and optional genre-specific implementations may be added here.

40 Appendix C: Example Character State Sheet (Fantasy)

This appendix provides a **full, illustrative example** of a character-focused State Sheet for a typical fantasy game.

It is not a template and not a build guide.

Its purpose is to show how **tracks, tags, conditions, scope, and collapse** coexist on a single character-focused sheet without becoming statistics, meters, or optimization tools.

40.1 How to Read This Example

This example represents: - One character - Mid-campaign play - Several pressures already in motion

The character is not failing.

They are **under strain**.

40.2 Character Context

Name: Alwen Thorne

Role in the fiction: Scout and messenger in a contested border region

Current situation: Operating ahead of allied forces while evading pursuit and managing dwindling resources

40.3 Active Tracks (Character Scope)

40.3.1 Track: Fatigue

- **Direction:** Accumulating
- **Scope:** Alwen (physical and mental endurance)
- **Threshold:** Exhaustion

What it represents: - Long travel without rest - Poor sleep - Continuous vigilance

GM Use: - As Fatigue rises, clean travel and combat outcomes disappear - At threshold, control becomes unreliable and recovery becomes necessary

40.3.2 Track: Exposure

- **Direction:** Escalating
- **Scope:** Alwen (visibility to enemies)
- **Threshold:** Identified

What it represents: - Leaving traces - Being seen repeatedly - Using known contacts

GM Use: - Higher exposure blocks stealth-based solutions - At threshold, anonymity is no longer possible

40.3.3 Track: Resolve

- **Direction:** Eroding
- **Scope:** Alwen (morale and conviction)
- **Threshold:** Breakdown

What it represents: - Moral strain - Isolation - Repeated hard choices

GM Use: - Loss of resolve narrows patient or compassionate outcomes - At threshold, hesitation or emotional fallout must be addressed

40.4 Tags and Conditions (Qualitative State)

40.4.1 Tag: Lightly Wounded

- **Scope:** Alwen
- **Effect:** Pain and distraction are present

This tag does not escalate on its own.

It shapes feasibility until treated or ignored long enough to worsen.

40.4.2 Condition: Low Supplies

- **Scope:** Alwen
- **Effect:** Limits extended travel, recovery, and preparation

This condition blocks some safe recovery outcomes.

40.4.3 Tag: Trusted by the Riverfolk

- **Scope:** Social (specific communities)
- **Effect:** Opens negotiation and shelter options

Positive tags are state too.

They should be represented when they meaningfully shape outcomes.

40.5 Capabilities in Use

These are **not ratings**.

They are reminders of feasibility.

- Skilled Pathfinder
- Silent Movement Training
- Familiar with Border Politics

Canonical reminder: > *Capabilities expand feasibility; they never bypass consequence.*

These capabilities explain *why* certain actions are possible, not why they are safe.

40.6 How This Sheet Is Used in Play

When Alwen acts, the GM reasons from this sheet:

- Fatigue and Low Supplies remove clean travel outcomes
- Exposure shapes stealth and pursuit
- Trusted by the Riverfolk opens social options others lack

If multiple outcomes remain possible, a roll may be allowed.

If not, the situation resolves directly.

40.7 Collapse and Simplification Examples

40.7.1 Example: Fatigue Collapses

If Fatigue reaches its threshold: - Fatigue track is removed - *Condition added:* Exhausted

The character is now operating from a new baseline.

40.7.2 Example: Exposure Stabilized

If Alwen successfully disappears: - Exposure track is removed - No lasting condition remains

Nothing permanent changed.

The track did its job and is gone.

40.8 Replacing the State Sheet

When the situation shifts: - A new State Sheet is created - Only relevant tracks, tags, and conditions are carried forward

Older sheets may be archived.

Only this sheet defines current state.

40.9 Why This Example Matters

This example shows that:

- Character state is readable at a glance
- Multiple pressures can coexist without math
- Tracks communicate cost, not failure
- Tags and conditions carry equal weight
- Simplification keeps play legible

This is the intended use of a character-focused State Sheet in a fantasy game.

This appendix is illustrative only. Your characters' state will differ based on fiction, genre, and choice.

41 Appendix D: Example Location or Dungeon State Sheet

This appendix provides a **full illustrative example** of a location-focused State Sheet for a dungeon or hazardous site in a fantasy game.

It demonstrates how environments operate as **systems under pressure**, not as static maps or encounter lists.

This is not a dungeon design template.

It is an example of how **state, pressure, and instability** make a location behave consistently over time.

41.1 How to Read This Example

This example represents: - One dangerous location - Multiple visits over time - A site that reacts to intrusion and neglect

The location is not an enemy.

It is **strained infrastructure**.

41.2 Location Context

Name: The Sunken Vault of Edras

Nature: Pre-Collapse arcane storage complex beneath a ruined monastery

Current use: Abandoned, partially flooded, intermittently scavenged

Why it matters: Contains sealed relics and unstable magical archives

41.3 Active Tracks (Location Scope)

41.3.1 Track: Structural Decay

- **Direction:** Worsening
- **Scope:** Entire Vault
- **Threshold:** Partial Collapse

What it represents: - Water damage - Rotting supports - Long-term neglect

GM Use: - As decay worsens, safe traversal outcomes disappear - At threshold, entire sections become inaccessible or hazardous

41.3.2 Track: Arcane Instability

- **Direction:** Volatile
- **Scope:** Inner Vault Chambers
- **Threshold:** Magical Breach

What it represents: - Failing containment wards - Residual enchantments interacting unpredictably

GM Use: - Limits clean use of magic - Introduces side effects and interference - At threshold, magic behaves dangerously or uncontrollably

41.3.3 Track: Attention

- **Direction:** Rising
- **Scope:** Surrounding Region
- **Threshold:** Organized Incursion

What it represents: - Rumors spreading - Scavenger activity - Interest from rival factions

GM Use: - Increased chance of interference - Fewer uncontested opportunities - At threshold, the site is no longer isolated

41.4 Tags and Conditions (Qualitative State)

41.4.1 Condition: Flooded Lower Levels

- **Scope:** Sublevels
- **Effect:** Blocks movement, increases traversal cost

This condition does not escalate unless acted upon.

41.4.2 Tag: Unstable Wards

- **Scope:** Arcane Chambers
- **Effect:** Alters magical Outcome Spaces

This tag explains *why* magic is risky here.

41.4.3 Tag: Narrow Access Shafts

- **Scope:** Entry Routes

- **Effect:** Limits large-scale movement and retreat

Positive or negative, environmental tags shape feasibility.

41.5 Using the Location in Play

When characters enter the Vault, the GM reasons from this sheet:

- Structural Decay shapes traversal and safety
- Arcane Instability shapes magical action
- Attention shapes timing and external pressure

If an action's outcome is obvious given this state, no roll is needed.

If uncertainty remains, dice may enter play.

41.6 Player Impact on Location State

Character actions may: - Accelerate decay - Stabilize wards - Increase or reduce attention

These effects are recorded directly on the State Sheet.

The location remembers how it has been treated.

41.7 Collapse and Simplification Examples

41.7.1 Example: Structural Collapse

If Structural Decay reaches its threshold: - Structural Decay track is removed - *Condition added:* Collapsed Sections

The Vault now has a new baseline.

41.7.2 Example: Arcane Stabilization

If wards are repaired: - Arcane Instability track is removed - *Tag added:* Reinforced Wards

Risk is reduced, but not erased.

41.8 Replacing the Location State Sheet

If the Vault's role in play changes significantly: - A new State Sheet is created - Only relevant conditions are carried forward

Old sheets may be archived.

Only the current sheet defines how the location behaves now.

41.9 Why This Example Matters

This example shows that:

- Locations carry pressure independently of characters
- Dungeons evolve through use and neglect
- Danger emerges from accumulated strain, not encounter balance
- State keeps exploration consistent without scripting

This is the intended use of a location-focused State Sheet in a fantasy game.

This appendix is illustrative only. Your locations will differ based on fiction and play.

42 Appendix E: Common GM Failure Modes and How to Recover

This appendix identifies **common failure modes** GMs encounter when learning or running Manifold, and provides **clear recovery guidance** for each.

Failure modes are not mistakes in competence.

They are predictable misalignments between habit and design.

Every one of these can be corrected *in play*.

42.1 Failure Mode 1: Rolling Too Often

What it looks like: - Dice are called for routine actions - Rolls confirm outcomes that are already obvious - Play feels slow or fragmented

Why it happens: - Habit from success/failure systems - Anxiety about “missing” uncertainty

How to recover: - Pause before rolling and ask: *What is uncertain here?* - If state already decides the outcome, resolve directly - Explain the decision in terms of visible state

If nothing meaningful could change, dice are unnecessary.

42.2 Failure Mode 2: Treating Pressure as Opposition

What it looks like: - Pressure is applied punitively - Escalation feels targeted or adversarial - Players feel pushed rather than constrained

Why it happens: - Conflating tension with antagonism

How to recover: - Reframe pressure as strain created by action or neglect - Apply it evenly and visibly - Let pressure exist without demanding response

Pressure should shape choices, not punish them.

42.3 Failure Mode 3: Letting History Dictate Outcomes

What it looks like: - Old failures are invoked to justify current loss - Archived state quietly constrains play - Players feel trapped by the past

Why it happens: - Confusing memory with authority

How to recover: - Return to the current State Sheet - Remove or collapse obsolete state - Restate what is *currently* true

History may inform judgment, but it does not dictate present state.

42.4 Failure Mode 4: Over-Representing State

What it looks like: - Too many tracks or tags - Players stop referencing the State Sheet - Decision-making becomes muddy

Why it happens: - Fear of losing information - Confusing detail with rigor

How to recover: - Merge similar state - Remove anything that does not shape decisions - Replace the State Sheet if needed

Clarity is more important than completeness.

42.5 Failure Mode 5: Avoiding Collapse

What it looks like: - Tracks linger indefinitely - Pressure accumulates without resolution - The world grows harsher without clear cause

Why it happens: - Reluctance to make lasting change

How to recover: - Identify what has become permanent - Collapse the track into a condition - Update the fiction accordingly

Collapse creates stability.

42.6 Failure Mode 6: Treating Capabilities as Immunity

What it looks like: - Special abilities bypass consequence - Risks are ignored because of power - Outcomes feel unearned

Why it happens: - Importing power-protection assumptions

How to recover: - Restate what the capability makes feasible - Apply pressure normally - Let instability affect powerful actions

Capabilities expand feasibility; they never bypass consequence.

42.7 Failure Mode 7: Withholding Reasoning

What it looks like: - GM calls feel opaque - Players question fairness - Trust erodes

Why it happens: - Fear of debate or slowdown

How to recover: - Explain decisions in terms of state - Invite clarification or correction - Keep explanations brief and factual

Transparency builds trust.

42.8 Failure Mode 8: Forcing Urgency

What it looks like: - Sudden threats appear without buildup - Tension feels artificial - Consequences feel arbitrary

Why it happens: - Anxiety about momentum

How to recover: - Look for existing pressure - Advance it honestly - Allow quiet moments when appropriate

Urgency should emerge, not be injected.

42.9 Failure Mode 9: Treating Disagreement as Challenge

What it looks like: - Defensive rulings - Escalating table tension - Authority struggles

Why it happens: - Misreading confusion as opposition

How to recover: - Re-anchor on intent and state - Treat disagreement as misalignment - Correct structure if needed

Most disputes vanish once understanding is shared.

42.10 Failure Mode 10: Expecting Mastery Too Soon

What it looks like: - GM frustration - Overcorrection - Hesitation to make calls

Why it happens: - Underestimating the learning curve

How to recover: - Focus on one concept per session - Accept imperfect judgment - Let experience teach the system

Manifold is learned through use.

42.11 Final Reminder

You do not fail by making mistakes.

You fail only by refusing to adjust.

If you: - Reason from visible state - Apply pressure honestly - Communicate clearly

You are running Manifold correctly.

This appendix is a safety net, not a checklist. Return to it when something feels off.

43 Appendix F – The Declarations Guide

This appendix describes **how new things enter the world in Manifold**.

It is not a set of special rules for characters.

It is a general framework for *declaring any entity with agency, impact, or persistence* — whether that entity is a person, place, object, force, or situation.

If something can change, exert pressure, or be affected by play, it can be declared.

43.1 What a Declaration Is

A **declaration** is the act of bringing something into the game world in a structured, honest way.

Declaration answers the question:

What is this thing, how does it act, and how can it fail?

Declaration is not: - optimization - balance math - hidden preparation - retroactive justification

Declaration is a commitment to **exposure**.

Once declared, an entity becomes subject to pressure, instability, and consequence like anything else in the world.

43.2 Declaration vs. Resolution vs. Evolution

It is useful to distinguish three related operations:

- **Declaration** – establishing that something exists and defining its initial shape
- **Resolution** – determining outcomes when that thing acts or is acted upon
- **Evolution** – changing that thing's structure over time through play

This appendix concerns **declaration only**.

43.3 The Universal Declaration Pattern

Every declaration follows the same pattern, regardless of entity type.

The **degree of detail applied to each step may vary** based on the complexity, importance, and expected lifespan of the entity being declared.

Some entities require full treatment across all steps. Others may only need a minimal declaration.

Manifold favors *appropriate fidelity*, not uniform process.

43.3.1 1. Name the Entity

Give the entity a clear name.

The name establishes identity and focus.

If you cannot name it, it is probably too vague to declare.

43.3.2 2. Declare Domain(s) of Capability

Identify the domains in which the entity meaningfully operates.

A domain answers:

What kinds of problems can this entity reliably engage with?

Domains should be: - few - clearly scoped - expressed in plain language

Examples: - Armed street enforcement - Structural sabotage - Arcane containment - Social influence within a guild

Do not list techniques.

Name spaces of action.

43.3.3 3. Declare Constraints for Each Domain

For **each domain**, you must declare: - limits - restrictions - vulnerabilities

Constraints answer:

What breaks first when this entity is pushed in this domain?

Constraints are not optional.

They are the primary balancing force in Manifold.

If an entity has multiple domains, **each domain carries its own full set of constraints**.

Breadth always increases exposure.

43.3.4 4. Identify Pressure Vectors

Determine how pressure accumulates on the entity.

Pressure vectors describe: - what stresses the entity - how instability is likely to appear - what kinds of situations accelerate failure

Pressure does not need to be quantified at declaration.

It only needs to be *understood*.

43.3.5 5. Assign Initial State

Record the entity's initial state using: - tracks (if bounded quantities matter) - tags (for qualitative conditions) - notes (for context)

Most entities begin **stable**, not already collapsing.

Declaration establishes *where collapse can happen*, not that it must happen immediately.

43.4 Balance Through Exposure

Manifold does not balance entities by limiting what they can do.

It balances by ensuring that **every declared capability introduces proportional ways to fail.**

If an entity appears too strong, it is almost always because: - constraints were skipped - pressure vectors were underspecified - domains were declared without cost

The corrective action is not to nerf outcomes.

It is to **complete the declaration.**

43.5 Declaring Different Kinds of Entities

The same pattern applies everywhere.

43.5.1 Characters

Characters declare: - personal domains - explicit limits - risk profiles

Dice may be used during declaration to introduce uncertainty and uneven reliability.

43.5.2 NPCs

NPCs do not require full character depth.

Most NPCs can be declared with: - one domain - one or two constraints - a single pressure vector

NPCs become more complex only if play demands it.

43.5.3 Threats and Dangers

Threats are entities whose primary function is to exert pressure.

Declare: - what they threaten - how that threat escalates - what weakens or diffuses them

Threats collapse when pressure resolves, not when “defeated.”

43.5.4 Traps and Hazards

Traps are situational entities.

Declare: - what triggers them - what domain they operate in - how they can fail or be bypassed

Avoid hidden absolutes.

Every trap should have an exposure.

43.5.5 Factions and Organizations

Factions are slow-moving entities with broad domains.

Declare: - what they care about - where they exert influence - how internal pressure manifests

Faction instability often appears as contradiction, not collapse.

43.5.6 Locations

Locations can have state.

Declare: - what the location enables - what stresses it - how it changes under pressure

A location under pressure becomes a story engine.

43.5.7 Situations

Situations are temporary entities.

They exist to be resolved.

Declare: - what is unresolved - what worsens over time - what happens if ignored

Situations rarely need full State Sheets.

43.6 Fast Declarations at the Table

Not every declaration requires a full pause or a full State Sheet.

For fast play: - declare a single domain - name one clear constraint - move on

You can always expand later.

For minor entities, temporary threats, or background actors, **index cards are often sufficient**.

Index cards work well when: - the entity is short-lived - only one or two pieces of state matter - you want the option to discard it cleanly

Full State Sheets are reserved for entities whose state will evolve meaningfully over time.

43.7 When to Re-Declare

Re-declare an entity when: - it enters a new phase - its domains change - its constraints collapse - it becomes central to play

Re-declaration replaces hidden escalation with explicit evolution.

43.8 Common Declaration Failures

Avoid these patterns: - Declaring power without exposure - Treating constraints as flavor only - Hiding omnipotence behind vagueness - Retrofitting constraints after outcomes

If play feels unfair or incoherent, revisit the declaration.

43.9 Final Reminder

Declaration is an act of honesty.

You are not predicting outcomes.

You are committing to how the world can push back.

Everything else follows from that.

End of Appendix X – The Declarations Guide

44 Appendix G – Combat Resolution Guide

This appendix explains how **combat is resolved in Manifold**.

It does not present a single combat system.

Instead, it shows how combat *emerges* from intent, state, pressure, and dice grammar—and how different implementations can support different combat textures without changing Manifold’s core assumptions.

Combat in Manifold is not a special mode.

It is **conflict under pressure**.

44.1 G.1 What Combat Is (and Is Not)

Combat in Manifold is: - A situation with rapid pressure accumulation - Multiple actors applying force simultaneously - High risk of instability and loss of control

Combat is **not**: - A turn-based mini-game by default - A hit-point depletion puzzle - A fairness simulation

If combat feels different from the rest of play, something has gone wrong.

44.2 G.2 When Combat Begins

Combat does not begin when initiative is rolled.

Combat begins when: - Violence becomes a credible outcome - Physical force is used to resolve intent - Pressure escalates faster than it can dissipate

There is no formal transition.

State already tells you when things have turned violent.

44.3 G.3 Declaring Intent in Combat

Intent declaration does not change in combat.

Players still declare: - What they are trying to accomplish - How they are attempting it - What they are relying on

Good combat intent focuses on **outcomes**, not actions.

Examples: - “I drive them back from the doorway.” - “I keep the captain occupied while others escape.” - “I break their morale before they regroup.”

Avoid treating combat as a list of attacks.

44.4 G.4 Outcome Space in Combat

Before any dice are rolled, the GM determines: - What outcomes are possible - Which outcomes are already gone due to state

In combat, clean outcomes disappear quickly.

Expect: - Tradeoffs - Partial success - Loss of position or control

Combat outcome spaces should be **messy**.

44.5 G.5 Using Dice Grammar in Combat

Your chosen dice grammar determines the *feel* of combat.

Below are common patterns.

44.5.1 Single-Die Grammars

- Fast
- Volatile
- Favor dramatic swings

Best for: - Cinematic combat - Small groups - High-risk violence

44.5.2 Multi-Die or Selection Grammars

- More consistent
- Slower escalation
- Greater emphasis on positioning

Best for: - Tactical play - Extended engagements - Organized groups

Dice are still only rolled when uncertainty matters.

44.6 G.6 Variance Rolls and Opposition

In combat, variance rolls are common.

They represent: - Enemy coordination - Environmental chaos - Momentum shifts

Variance rolls should: - Use the same grammar as player rolls - Be clearly tied to visible state

They do not represent “enemy turns.”

They represent **the world pushing back**.

44.7 G.7 Pressure Escalation in Combat

Combat accelerates pressure.

Common combat pressure sources: - Fatigue from exertion - Wounding from harm - Distraction from fear or overload

Pressure should: - Accumulate quickly - Remove clean outcomes early - Force decisions under strain

If combat feels static, pressure is too slow.

44.8 G.8 Instability and Loss of Control

Instability appears quickly in combat.

Signs of instability: - Forced worst-die selection - Loss of positioning - Unintended targets or consequences

Instability does not end combat.

It makes combat unpredictable.

44.9 G.9 Ending Combat

Combat ends when: - One side disengages - Control collapses - The situation meaningfully changes

Combat rarely ends cleanly.

Expect: - Lingering conditions - Changed relationships - New pressures

Do not wait for “defeat.”

End combat when state says it is over.

44.10 G.10 Designing Good Combat Encounters

Good combat encounters are not balanced.

They are **pressurized**.

Design combat by: - Giving combatants different limits - Providing terrain or positioning pressure - Allowing non-violent exits

A good combat encounter: - Could be avoided - Could escalate - Could end unexpectedly

44.11 G.11 Common Combat Failure Modes

Avoid: - Treating combat as a separate ruleset - Tracking too many micro-conditions - Letting dice override state - Prolonged exchanges without state change

If combat drags: - Increase pressure - Remove outcomes - Collapse control

44.12 G.12 Combat as Worldbuilding

Combat leaves marks.

After combat, update state: - Add conditions - Advance tracks - Change relationships

Violence should: - Solve one problem - Create two more

If combat resolves everything cleanly, it was too gentle.

44.13 Final Note

Combat in Manifold is not about winning fights.

It is about **what violence costs, who loses control, and what changes afterward.**

If your combats do that, they are working.

45 Appendix H – GM Hot Swap

This appendix describes how Manifold supports **changing Game Masters**—even mid-campaign, and even mid-game—without restarting the world, rewriting characters, or breaking continuity.

This feature is optional.

Many tables will never use it.

But it is a natural consequence of Manifold’s design, and for some groups it becomes one of the framework’s most powerful strengths.

45.1 H.1 Why GM Hot Swap Works in Manifold

Most roleplaying games tightly couple: - World knowledge - Narrative authority - Mechanical control to a single GM.

Manifold separates these concerns.

Because: - State is externalized - Pressure is explicit - Dice do not grant permission

The game does not *live* in one person’s head.

It lives in the **active State Sheets.**

This makes GM transition possible without loss of integrity.

45.2 H.2 The Minimum Requirement for a GM Change

To take over as GM, a new GM needs only: - The current public and shared State Sheets - A clear understanding of the active pressures

They do **not** need: - Full world lore - Secret plans - Knowledge of past intent

If the state is visible, play can continue.

45.3 H.3 Private State Is Optional, Not Fragile

Manifold allows private GM state.

It does not require it.

If a GM wishes to protect private state during a handoff: - That state can remain undisclosed - It can be frozen - Or it can be retired entirely

Private state never dictates outcomes directly.

It only shapes future pressure.

Losing access to it does not break the game.

45.4 H.4 Seamless Handoff via New Scope

One of the easiest ways to hot swap GMs is by **changing scope**.

A new GM can: - Introduce a new location - Declare new factions - Activate a different region while the existing world state continues elsewhere.

The table does not need to resolve or explain the transition.

The camera simply moves.

45.5 H.5 Parallel GMing (Optional)

Some tables choose to support **parallel GMing**.

In this model: - Different GMs track different parts of the world - Pressure may or may not feed between them

Examples: - One GM tracks political pressure - Another tracks wilderness or external threats

Whether pressures interact is a **table decision**, not a system requirement.

State Sheets make this explicit.

45.6 H.6 Mid-Session GM Swap

A mid-session swap is possible when: - The current situation reaches a pause or transition - State is briefly reviewed and updated

The new GM then: - Frames the next situation - Applies existing pressure - Continues play

No mechanical reset is required.

45.7 H.7 What Should Not Transfer

When swapping GMs, do not attempt to transfer: - Unspoken intentions - Planned outcomes - Narrative arcs

Those concepts are not part of Manifold's authority structure.

Only state transfers.

45.8 H.8 Why This Encourages New GMs

Because: - Preparation is lightweight - Authority is visible - Failure modes are recoverable

Players often feel comfortable trying GMing.

They do not need: - Their own world - New characters - Perfect system mastery

They only need to engage with state honestly.

45.9 H.9 When Not to Use GM Hot Swap

GM Hot Swap may not be appropriate if: - The table prefers strong authorial voice - Secrecy and surprise are central goals - One GM strongly curates tone and pacing

Manifold does not require rotation.

It permits it.

45.10 Final Note

GM Hot Swap is not a rule.

It is an **affordance**.

If your table never uses it, nothing is lost.

If your table embraces it, Manifold becomes: - More resilient - More teachable - More communal

The world persists.

Only the perspective changes.