

Manifold

FAQ

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1 Manifold FAQ: Purpose, Use, and Manual Integration

This document explains **what the Manifold FAQ is**, **how it should be used**, and **how it connects to the three core manuals**. It is intended for Game Masters, facilitators, and anyone onboarding a table to Manifold for the first time.

The FAQ itself is maintained as a separate document. This write-up exists to contextualize it, not to replace it.

1.1 What the FAQ Is

The Manifold FAQ is **not a rules expansion** and **not a substitute for the manuals**.

It exists to address a specific problem:

Early Manifold play often fails not because the system is unclear, but because players and GMs lack confidence in how to apply judgment within the structure.

The FAQ exists to:

- Close confidence gaps at the table
- Normalize correct use of judgment
- Prevent drift back toward DCs, adversarial play, or dice-as-permission
- Answer the questions that reliably arise during early sessions

The FAQ does **not** introduce new mechanics, procedures, or authorities. Every answer is derived directly from the system’s existing contracts and assumptions.

1.2 What the FAQ Is Not

The FAQ is deliberately **not**:

- A step-by-step rules guide
- A replacement for learning the system through play
- A list of edge cases to memorize

- A place to negotiate or reinterpret core invariants

If a question would require inventing a new rule to answer, it does not belong in the FAQ.

1.3 How to Use the FAQ at the Table

The FAQ is designed to be used **reactively**, not studied front-to-back.

Recommended use:

- Consult it **when something feels uncertain or uncomfortable**
- Use it to validate or correct instincts
- Read the relevant entry aloud if helpful
- Return to play immediately

The FAQ should **reduce friction**, not interrupt flow.

Many groups will find that after several sessions, they stop needing it altogether.

1.4 Relationship to the Core Manuals

The FAQ does not stand alone. Each cluster of questions maps cleanly to concepts introduced in the manuals.

1.4.1 Game Master Manual

The FAQ most directly supports the **Manifold Game Master Manual**.

It reinforces and operationalizes guidance found in chapters covering:

- Intent declaration and outcome space shaping
- Roll-gating and appropriate dice usage
- Pressure and instability
- Interference and overlapping actions
- GM judgment, fairness, and consistency

In particular:

- FAQ #1–#5 expand on *how and when dice are used*
- FAQ #6–#9 clarify *pressure and instability over time*
- FAQ #10–#11 support *GM judgment and table disagreement*
- FAQ #12–#18 reinforce *state sheet usage and campaign continuity*

If a GM is unsure how to apply a concept from the GM Manual in play, the FAQ is the first place to check.

1.4.2 Player Guide

While the FAQ is GM-facing, several entries indirectly support the **Manifold Player Guide**.

Relevant connections include:

- Player understanding of intent declaration (FAQ #2, #14)
- Why players cannot request rolls for advantage (FAQ #13, #15)
- How cooperation and shared responsibility function in conflict (FAQ #11)

Groups may benefit from selectively sharing or paraphrasing certain FAQ answers with players, especially during early sessions.

1.4.3 World Building Guide

The FAQ strongly complements the **Manifold World Building Guide**, particularly in how it treats pressure, instability, and scope.

Direct alignments include:

- Pressure as an emergent property of world state (FAQ #6–#9)
- Instability thresholds as authored, not universal (FAQ #7)
- Managing world scope and abstraction (FAQ #18)
- Introducing and retiring entities over time (FAQ #16–#17)

The FAQ helps ensure that world-building decisions remain playable, legible, and responsive once the campaign is underway.

1.5 Why the FAQ Matters in Manifold

Manifold is intentionally light on mechanical enforcement and heavy on **shared reasoning**.

That makes it powerful — but also unfamiliar to players coming from traditional systems.

The FAQ exists to make one thing explicit:

You are not expected to improvise the system. You are expected to apply it.

Judgment in Manifold is not freeform. It is bounded by state, pressure, and prior fiction. The FAQ helps tables recognize when they are inside those bounds.

1.6 Status and Evolution

The FAQ is a **living support document**.

New entries should be added only when:

- A question repeatedly arises in real play
- The answer can be derived cleanly from existing rules and contracts
- Clarification would reduce friction without adding procedure

If an FAQ entry would change how the system works, it belongs in the manuals — not here.

1.7

2 FAQ

This document provides answers to questions likely to arise in early adoption of Manifold.

2.1 FAQ #1 — “Can I roll dice to help me decide how pressure or instability expresses itself?”

Yes — optionally, and with limits.

Sometimes the world is under pressure, instability is already present, and more than one interpretation would be equally valid. In those moments, the GM may want a little distance from the decision — room to say “*the dice did it.*”

Manifold allows this, as long as the dice are used to **sample how existing pressure expresses**, not to decide what is possible or what outcome occurs.

2.1.1 What This Is For

This kind of roll exists to help answer questions like:

- Whose control slips first?
- Where does the pressure bite hardest?
- Which intent expresses cleanly, and which comes out compromised?
- Who absorbs the cost or distortion this time?

It is a **judgment aid**, not a resolution mechanic.

2.1.2 One Acceptable Approach

1. The GM rolls a World Die

- Typically a **d20**
- Represents ambient pressure and instability already in play
- It is *not* a difficulty number

2. Players roll a relevant die

- Each player rolls a die tied to the domain they are acting through
- The die must already be justified by state, capability, or context
- This represents reliability or grounding, not power

3. Compare relative position — not success

- Higher or lower does not mean “win” or “lose”
- The comparison helps decide *where distortion, cost, or loss of control lands*

4. The GM still explains the outcome

- The dice tilt the decision
 - The GM narrates *why it makes sense*
-

2.1.3 What This Roll Can Do

- Tilt how an outcome tier manifests
- Decide who bears a cost or complication
- Determine timing, exposure, or collateral
- Help distribute pressure impartially

2.1.4 What This Roll Cannot Do

- Create new pressure or instability
- Decide whether an action succeeds
- Add or remove outcome tiers
- Override established state
- Replace GM judgment

If the roll would do any of the above, it should not be made.

Key Principle: Dice may help express pressure — they may never replace explanation.

This tool is optional. If you already know how the pressure should express, do not roll.

2.2 FAQ #2 — “What if the players want to roll but I don’t think there’s real uncertainty?”

Players may request a roll when they believe uncertainty exists. In Manifold, the way to resolve this is not argument, but **reference to state**.

If a roll is justified, players should be able to **point to specific state** — tags, tracks, conditions, or pressures — that make more than one outcome tier genuinely plausible.

When that reference is clear, there is usually little to disagree about.

If interpretation still differs:

- It is acceptable to **poll the table** for the most widely accepted interpretation *for this action*
- Resolve the action using that interpretation
- Afterward, briefly discuss what tags, tracks, or state clarity were missing that would have made the decision obvious

This keeps play moving while improving the quality of state going forward.

2.3 FAQ #3 — “Can I ever roll dice for NPCs or the world alone?”

Yes. You should.

Players routinely roll dice to sample a single outcome from a bounded set of possibilities. The GM may do the same for the game world.

World or NPC-only rolls are appropriate when:

- You are choosing between multiple valid world responses
- No player agency is being overridden
- The possibilities are already bounded by state

These rolls should:

- Use dice consistent with the campaign’s dice grammar
- Be grounded in an appropriate world or faction track
- Sample from an already-closed set of options

This is not opposition. It is **world sampling**.

2.4 FAQ #4 — “What if the dice result feels wrong after the roll?”

This usually indicates a mismatch between **state and action**, not a problem with the dice.

When Manifold’s process is followed correctly:

- Outcome spaces are shaped before the roll
- Impossible results are excluded
- Dice only select among outcomes that already make sense

As a result, rolls may feel *unlucky*, but they should rarely feel *wrong*.

If a result does feel wrong, examine:

- Whether the outcome space was shaped too loosely
- Whether pressure or instability was underrepresented

- Whether key state was missing or unclear

The fix is almost always **state correction**, not roll revision.

2.5 FAQ #5 — “How do I avoid over-rolling in tense scenes?”

High-pressure, fast-paced scenes can legitimately involve more rolls than usual.

However, after each meaningful resolution:

- State should collapse or stabilize
- Some possibilities should close
- Uncertainty should narrow

If the number of plausible outcomes keeps growing instead of shrinking, this usually indicates a **tracking problem**:

- Pressure is not being collapsed into consequences
- Instability is not being expressed
- State is not being updated decisively

In a healthy Manifold scene, dice usage naturally tapers as the situation resolves.

2.6 FAQ #6 — “How fast should pressure build?”

There is **no prescribed rate** at which pressure must increase.

How and when pressure builds depends on:

- The current state of the world
- What pressures already exist
- How player actions have (or have not) interacted with those pressures
- What the unfolding play suggests is now unstable or untenable

Pressure is not a timer. It is a response.

2.6.1 Let World State Drive Pressure

Pressure should change when the world has reason to change.

If a known tension exists and play moves forward without addressing it, that tension should usually worsen.

Example:

- *The castle is overtaxing the village.*
- The group completes several side quests.

- Nothing meaningfully alters the taxation situation.

At the end of a quest or scene boundary, it is reasonable to **increase that pressure** to reflect continued strain.

2.6.2 Let Player Action Create Pressure

Pressure should also arise directly from player behavior.

Example:

- A player aggressively haggles and seriously angers the blacksmith.
- The reaction is strong, persistent, and socially meaningful.

You might:

- Increase an existing “**Antagonism with Smith Guild**” track
- Or create that track if it did not previously exist

Pressure tracks are allowed to be created when play justifies them.

2.6.3 Let Play Inspire Change

Not all pressure comes from preplanned tensions.

If play inspires a new instability, rivalry, fear, or obligation:

- It is appropriate to introduce new pressure
- As long as it is grounded in what has already happened

Manifold expects the world to learn from play.

2.6.4 Guiding Principle

Let play dictate when, how, and why pressure changes.

If pressure feels arbitrary, it is usually because it is not clearly tied to prior state or action.

2.7 FAQ #7 — “When does instability become dangerous?”

Manifold relies on judgment calls, but it is founded in structure.

Instability becomes dangerous when the tracked instability reaches the point you have already defined as **untenable**.

To determine where that point lies, ask:

- What instability is being tracked?
- How many divisions or steps does that track have before it is exhausted?
- How strong are the pressures currently driving it?
- What has happened recently that would push it forward or pull it back?

These questions always have answers in the moment, because they are grounded in recorded state and recent play.

You do not need a universal threshold. You need to know **where this track ends**.

When instability reaches that end point, it is no longer latent or manageable. It is now dangerous, and it must express itself through loss of control, cascading consequences, or irreversible change.

2.8 FAQ #8 — “Can pressure exist without immediate consequences?”

Yes — and it frequently will.

Pressure often exists long before it expresses itself through visible consequences.

A community may endure heavy taxation for years. A faction may tolerate insult after insult. A character may carry strain well past what looks reasonable. None of this requires immediate collapse.

Pressure represents **stored strain**, not action.

What matters is not how long pressure has existed, but whether something happens that **releases, redirects, or ignites it**.

A single spark — a bad decree, a public humiliation, a moment of violence — can cause long-standing pressure to express itself suddenly and dramatically.

Manifold expects pressure to accumulate quietly until play gives it a reason to move.

2.9 FAQ #9 — “How do I show pressure without punishing players?”

Ask yourself how you would convey urgency or danger in a traditional roleplaying game.

Those same storytelling tools apply here:

- Tone and pacing
- Description and atmosphere
- NPC behavior and reactions
- Environmental cues
- What people are worried about, whispering about, or avoiding

In Manifold, these narrative signals are not cosmetic. They are the **preferred way** to express current pressure levels to the table.

Players should feel pressure before they see its mechanical effects.

If pressure is present but invisible, players cannot meaningfully respond to it. If pressure is communicated clearly through fiction, players can choose whether to engage with it, mitigate it, or ignore it.

Pressure becomes punitive only when it appears without warning. When it is communicated through play, it becomes information.

2.10 FAQ #10 — “How do I know I’m being fair without DCs?”

Ask yourself a single question:

Given what I see across all State Sheets, is this outcome plausible, and does it fit the narrative?

If the answer is **yes**, you are being fair in Manifold terms.

Fairness in Manifold does not come from numerical thresholds or hidden difficulty values. It comes from:

- Visible state
- Consistent interpretation
- Outcomes that follow from what has already been established

If players can point to the same state you are using to justify the outcome, fairness is already present — even when the result is costly or unwelcome.

2.11 FAQ #11 — “What if players disagree with my interpretation?”

Manifold assumes cooperative play and shared responsibility.

If the whole table disagrees with your interpretation, take that seriously:

- Pause
- Ask what state or fiction they believe you missed
- Consider whether your read is inconsistent with what has been established
- Adjust if needed

Most disputes in Manifold are not about “rules.” They are about how overlapping intents interact and who pays which cost.

A useful mental model is a **choreographed fight**.

Like a great professional wrestling match, a great Manifold conflict happens because everyone is playing *together*:

- Players coordinate intent, positioning, and risk
- People set each other up for reversals, sacrifices, and dramatic turns
- Even a character ending up on the bottom can be a strong, satisfying moment when it is earned and clearly justified

This does **not** mean outcomes are pre-decided. It means that conflict works best when participants treat it as a shared scene with real stakes, not a private attempt to beat each other.

If disagreement keeps recurring, it usually means the state is under-specified. Treat that as a signal to improve tags, tracks, and clarity rather than re-litigating every resolution.

2.12 FAQ #12 — “How do I stay consistent across sessions?”

Keep your **State Sheets**.

Fill out the entire header every time:

- Name
- Tracked by
- Date
- Version number (simple sequential numbering is sufficient)

State Sheets are the continuity spine of a Manifold campaign. If you preserve them, consistency largely takes care of itself.

Restarting a Manifold campaign should be painless if you have:

- The current State Sheets from the previous session
- A few general narrative notes

Because state is explicit and shared, continuity does not live in one person’s memory.

In fact, with complete State Sheets, **another player could step into the GM role and continue the active campaign** with minimal disruption.

If consistency feels fragile, it is usually a signal that state is not being recorded clearly enough.

2.13 FAQ #13 — “What if a player tries to push for rolls or advantage?”

This almost always indicates that the rules are not being clearly understood.

In Manifold, if dice are being implemented correctly, this behavior is not possible.

Players do not request rolls to gain advantage. Rolls only occur when:

- Uncertainty genuinely exists
- Multiple outcome tiers are plausible
- State already justifies that uncertainty

If a player is pushing for a roll, pause and revisit:

- What state actually applies
- Whether more than one outcome tier is possible
- Whether a roll is warranted at all

This is a teaching moment, not a disciplinary one.

2.14 FAQ #14 — “What if a player avoids declaring intent clearly?”

Engage with them.

Some players struggle to articulate intent, especially if they are used to rules-heavy systems.

Instead of probing aggressively:

- Ask gentle, leading questions
- Encourage them to think through the situation
- Ask what *they* would do in that moment and why

You can temporarily set the game aside and speak plainly:

“If this were you, what would you try to do here?”

Once they answer, help frame that response as a declared intent within the fiction.

Clear intent is not about precision. It is about giving the table something concrete to respond to so play can move forward.

2.15 FAQ #15 — “What if players try to optimize the dice grammar?”

See **FAQ #13**.

Dice optimization does not exist in Manifold.

- Your **tracks** are set by what you have done and endured
- Your **dice** are determined by those tracks
- The **sample pool** is defined by state and circumstance
- The roll only samples from that pool

There is nothing to optimize without changing the underlying state — and state only changes through play.

If players are attempting to optimize dice, the system is not being applied as intended.

2.16 FAQ #16 — “When do I create a new State Sheet?”

There are two primary reasons to create a new State Sheet.

2.16.1 1) Collapse

As play progresses, state accumulates, shifts, and resolves. Tags expire, tracks complete, and some details stop mattering.

Over time, sheets can become cluttered.

When this happens:

- Start a new State Sheet
- Transfer **only what is still current and relevant**
- Leave resolved or obsolete state behind

This collapse is intentional. It keeps state legible and focused on what still matters.

2.16.2 2) New Entities

Whenever you introduce a new meaningful entity into the world, you create a new State Sheet for it.

This includes:

- Characters
- Factions
- Locations
- Organizations
- Situations or threats that now persist independently

If it has state that should persist beyond the current scene, it deserves its own sheet.

2.16.3 Lesser Reasons (Use Sparingly)

Occasionally, you may need additional sheets for the same entity because:

- Too many simultaneous tracks or tags are active
- Different scopes of the same entity need to be tracked in parallel

If this happens:

- Use **sub-version numbers** (e.g., 3a, 3b) to indicate multiple active sheets
- Treat this as a warning sign

In most cases, it is better to **collapse and abstract** tracks into higher-level buckets rather than proliferating sheets.

State Sheets should clarify the game, not multiply it.

2.17 FAQ #17 — “When do I retire a State Sheet?”

See **FAQ #16**.

In general, a State Sheet should be retired when:

- It has become cluttered beyond usefulness
- It no longer represents an active entity, situation, or pressure in the game world

Retired sheets are generally not discarded. They are **historical records**.

Keeping old sheets preserves causal history and makes future continuity easier, but they should no longer be consulted for active resolution once the entity or situation they describe is no longer in play.

If a game is truly unconcerned with referring to historical records for flavor purposes or general gameplay introspection, old sheets can be discarded.

2.18 FAQ #18 — “How much world state is too much?”

If tracking world state feels cumbersome to manage or routinely spans more than one active sheet, it is likely too much.

When this happens, consider **refactoring**:

- Collapse multiple tracks into more general categories
- Combine related tags into higher-level abstractions
- Retire or resolve pressures that are no longer central to play

The right amount of world state depends on the table.

An experienced group may comfortably track several sheets of world state at once. A newer group may only want one.

Two principles help guide this decision:

1. **Players can only be in one place at a time.**

Only the pressures relevant to where the players are — or what they are affecting — need to be active.

2. **Most strong stories only need a few major pressure points at once.**

If you are tracking more than two or three significant pressures, ask which ones actually matter *right now*.

The fiction will usually tell you when you have exactly the right amount of state. When it feels focused and legible at the table, you do.