

Manifold

Player Guide

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1 The Manifold Player’s Guide

This guide is for players.

You do not need to read the GM Manual to play Manifold well.

You do not need to learn rules, optimize choices, or master procedures.

What you *do* need is a clear understanding of how Manifold expects you to **think, decide, and engage with consequence**.

This guide explains that—plainly, and without mechanics.

1.1 What Playing Manifold Is Like

Manifold is a game about acting inside a world that **remembers what happens**.

When you take action: - The world changes - Pressure accumulates - Future options shift

Nothing resets between scenes.

Nothing is forgotten because it was inconvenient.

This does not make the game harsher.

It makes it *honest*.

1.2 What You Control (and What You Don't)

As a player, you control: - Your character's intent - The approach you take - What risks you accept

You do **not** control: - The outcome - The cost - How the world reacts over time

Dice do not protect you from consequence.

They only help answer questions when the outcome is genuinely uncertain.

1.3 Declaring Intent

When you act, say **what you are trying to do**.

Good intent statements answer: - What you want to achieve - How you are attempting it - What you are relying on

Example: > "I want to cross the ravine quickly by climbing the old support cables, before anyone notices."

Clear intent helps the table understand: - What is at stake - What could go wrong - Whether a roll is needed

1.4 Character Declaration (Not Character Creation)

In Manifold, you do not *build* a character.

You **declare** one.

Character declaration establishes the shape your character occupies in the world, rather than assembling abilities or optimizing options.

This declaration process is intentionally light and flexible. The exact details are set by the game you are playing and the genre it belongs to.

What matters is the kind of thinking involved.

1.4.1 The Basic Steps of Character Declaration

When declaring a character, you will usually do the following:

1. **Name a domain of capability**

Describe the kinds of problems your character reliably engages with.

2. **Name clear limits**

State what strains your character quickly or lies outside their reach.

3. **Describe a risk profile**

Identify where pressure and instability are most likely to affect them.

4. **Note initial capabilities**

Write a few plain-language statements explaining why certain actions are feasible.

5. **Indicate a growth direction**

Describe how the character is likely to change if they survive and persist.

You are not selecting powers.

You are establishing **constraints, focus, and vulnerability**.

Once declared, the character enters play as part of the world's state.

1.5 Your Character Is Defined by Constraint

In Manifold, characters are not defined by power levels or lists of abilities.

They are defined by: - What they are especially capable of - What strains them quickly - Where they are vulnerable

These limits are not weaknesses.

They are what make your choices matter.

1.6 Capabilities Explain Possibility

Your character has **capabilities**.

Capabilities explain *why* something is possible for you.

They do not make actions safe.

They do not guarantee success.

If a capability applies, it means: > “This is something my character could realistically attempt.”

Everything else depends on the situation.

1.7 Pressure Is Always Building

The world applies **pressure** over time.

Pressure comes from: - Acting in risky environments - Taking shortcuts - Ignoring problems - Letting time pass

Pressure is not punishment.

It is the cost of existing in a living world.

1.8 Instability Means Loss of Control

When pressure builds too far, it can turn into **instability**.

Instability means: - Plans become unreliable - Clean outcomes disappear - Control is harder to maintain

Instability is not failure.

It is the world becoming volatile.

1.9 What the Dice Do

Dice are used sparingly.

They are rolled only when: - Your intent is clear - Multiple outcomes are genuinely possible - The difference between those outcomes matters

The dice do **not** decide whether you were allowed to try.

They only help determine *which possible outcome occurs*.

1.10 Success and Failure Are Not Binary

Most outcomes in Manifold are mixed.

You might: - Achieve your goal at a cost - Succeed partially - Lose control while still changing the situation

What matters is not whether you “won.”

What matters is **how the situation is different afterward.**

1.11 State Sheets Are Shared Memory

The table keeps visible records of what currently matters.

These are called **State Sheets**.

There is not one master sheet.

State is spread across the **active** sheets that are currently in play: - public sheets everyone can see - shared sheets used by the table - private sheets held by the GM

Together, these active sheets form the world’s current state.

State Sheets show things like: - Ongoing pressures - Active instability - Important conditions

You are encouraged to: - Look at the sheets you can see - Reference them - Ask what is being tracked privately when it affects your decisions

If something is not on the **current active State Sheets**, it is not actively shaping play.

1.12 Playing in Good Faith

Manifold assumes everyone is playing honestly.

This means: - You state your intent clearly - You accept consequences that follow - You do not search for loopholes

The game works best when everyone is reasoning from the same picture of the world.

1.13 You Don’t Need to Protect Your Character

Your character is not fragile.

They are resilient, capable, and adaptable.

But they are not immune.

Trying to avoid all risk will: - Narrow your options - Increase long-term pressure - Make the world harder to navigate

Engaging honestly—even when it’s risky—is how the game moves.

1.14 Learning Through Play

You are not expected to understand everything immediately.

You will learn: - What kinds of risks matter - How pressure builds - When dice appear by seeing it happen.

Ask questions.

Point at the State Sheets.

Say when something feels unclear.

1.15 What to Do in Your First Session

In your first session: - Focus on clear intent - Accept imperfect outcomes - Pay attention to what changes

You are not being tested.

You are exploring a world together.

1.16 Final Word

Manifold rewards attention, not mastery.

If you: - Say what you are trying to do - Accept what follows - Stay engaged with the shared state

You are playing correctly.

Everything else will come with time.

Welcome to Manifold.

2 Player Appendix: Declaring Constraint and Playing to Strength

If you are used to traditional character creation, Manifold may feel backwards.

You may find yourself thinking:

“Why am I being asked to declare my weaknesses?”

This appendix exists to answer that question—and to show how declaring constraint is how you get **strong, satisfying, and distinctive characters** in Manifold.

2.1 This Is Not About Making Your Character Worse

Declaring constraint is not about weakening your character.

It is about **making their strengths real**.

In many games, characters are defined primarily by what they can do.

Over time, that often leads to: - Characters who can solve most problems - Risks that feel abstract or temporary - Differences that blur under pressure

Manifold takes the opposite approach.

By declaring where your character strains, you give the world *something to push against*.

That pressure is what makes your capabilities matter.

2.2 Why Strength Requires Constraint

If your character: - Is good at everything - Handles pressure equally well everywhere - Has no clear breaking points

Then no situation can meaningfully test them.

Constraint creates: - Drama - Identity - Consequence

A character who is brilliant but fragile is not weaker than a character who is generically competent.

They are **sharper**.

2.3 You Are Not Declaring Failure

When you declare limits, you are not saying: - “My character is bad at this.”

You are saying: - “This is where pressure lands fastest.”

That difference matters.

Pressure does not mean automatic loss.

It means: - Costs arrive sooner - Instability appears faster - Clean outcomes disappear earlier

Your character can still succeed.

They just succeed *honestly*.

2.4 How Declaring Constraint Gives You Power

Declaring constraint gives you three forms of control:

2.4.1 1. You Shape the Kind of Trouble You Face

By naming limits, you tell the table: - What kinds of situations matter to you - What risks are interesting

The GM is not inventing pressure arbitrarily.

They are engaging with what you declared.

2.4.2 2. You Protect Your Core Strengths

When your limits are explicit, your strengths are clearer.

If you did not declare strain in a domain, it means: - You are competent there - Pressure will build more slowly

This is not immunity.

It is focus.

2.4.3 3. You Avoid Hidden Punishment

When limits are unstated, pressure can feel surprising or unfair.

When limits are declared, consequences are visible.

Nothing comes “out of nowhere.”

2.5 Thinking Backward (The Helpful Way)

Instead of asking:

“What is my character bad at?”

Ask:

“Where do I want tension to show up?”

Good constraint declarations: - Invite difficult choices - Create meaningful tradeoffs - Make victories feel earned

2.6 Getting the Abilities You Want—Honestly

If you want your character to be: - Highly skilled - Reliable - Dangerous - Influential

You absolutely can.

The key is **pairing strength with strain**.

Examples: - A master duelist who exhausts quickly - A powerful mage whose magic destabilizes environments - A charismatic leader who attracts attention and scrutiny

You do not lose power.

You define its cost.

2.7 Multi-Domain Characters Are Not Generalists

Some players want characters who operate across multiple domains.

This is allowed.

But it comes with consequences.

2.8 What Multi-Domain Constraint Really Means

If your character declares capability across multiple domains: - Pressure accumulates from more directions - Instability has more ways to appear - Recovery becomes more complex

This does **not** mean you are weaker.

It means: - You are more exposed - You have more moving parts

Multi-domain characters are often: - Highly versatile - Frequently strained - Forced into harder choices

2.9 Single-Domain Focus Is Not Limitation

A character with a narrow domain: - Builds pressure more slowly - Recovers more cleanly - Holds their ground longer

They are not less interesting.

They are **deeper**.

2.10 The Real Question to Ask

When declaring your character, ask:

“What kind of pressure do I want to play through?”

If the answer excites you, you are doing it right.

2.11 Final Reframe

Manifold does not ask you to give up power.

It asks you to **choose where power bends instead of breaks**.

That choice is what makes your character distinct.

That is not a weakness.

It is ownership.

3 Player Appendix: Where the GM Is Reasoning From

This appendix exists to **orient players**, not to turn you into a co-GM.

You are not expected to read the full GM Manual.

But it *is* useful to know **where the GM’s decisions are coming from**, and which parts of the system are doing the work you see at the table.

This cross-reference explains that at a high level.

3.1 A Simple Mental Model

When something happens in play, the GM is usually reasoning through this chain:

1. What is the current state?
2. What pressure or instability applies?
3. What outcomes are genuinely possible?
4. Do dice need to be rolled?
5. What changes as a result?

Every GM decision you see comes from this process.

3.2 If You Are Wondering “Why Can / Can’t I Do This?”

The GM is likely looking at:

- **Act III – Possible Outcomes**
What kinds of results are even on the table right now.
- **Act IV – Pressure and Instability**
Whether strain has removed clean or controlled options.
- **Act V – Capabilities and Feasibility**
Whether your character has a believable way to attempt this.

This is not about permission.

It is about honesty.

3.3 If You Are Wondering “Why Did This Go Badly?”

The answer is almost always visible.

The GM is reasoning from:

- **Act IV – Living with Instability**
How loss of control affects outcomes.
- **Act VII – Making State Visible**
What pressure or conditions were already present.
- **Appendix E – Common Failure Modes**
(Yes, GMs make mistakes too—and how they recover.)

If you can point to state, the outcome was earned.

3.4 If You Are Wondering “Why Did We Roll (or Not Roll)?”

This comes from:

- **Act II – Uncertainty and When Dice Enter**
Dice are only used when uncertainty matters.
- **Act VII – Roll Gating and State**
State determines whether dice are allowed to speak.

If the outcome was obvious, no roll was needed.

If multiple outcomes mattered, a roll was required.

3.5 If You Are Wondering “Why Is the World Getting Harder?”

The GM is not escalating arbitrarily.

They are applying:

- **Act IV – Pressure Accumulation**
Strain builds through action, neglect, and time.
- **Act VII – Collapse and Simplification**
Some changes become permanent baselines.

The world changes because it remembers.

3.6 If You Are Wondering “What Is My Responsibility as a Player?”

Your responsibilities are simple:

- Declare intent clearly
- Engage honestly with consequence
- Pay attention to visible state
- Ask questions when something is unclear

This aligns with:

- **Act II – Declaring Intent**
- **Act VIII – Table Communication and Good-Faith Play**

You are part of the reasoning loop.

3.7 What You Do *Not* Need to Read

You do **not** need to study: - Resolution algorithms - Pressure math - Instability thresholds

Those tools exist to support the GM.

You only need to understand **how the world responds**.

3.8 How to Use This Appendix

Use this page when: - A ruling surprises you - You want to understand the system better - You’re curious how the game stays fair without balance math

You do not need to quote chapters.

Just knowing *that* this reasoning exists is enough.

3.9 Final Reassurance

The GM is not hiding rules from you.

They are reasoning from shared principles.

If you can see the state, you can understand the outcome.

That transparency is intentional.

You are not outside the system.

You are playing inside it.

4 Manifold at a Glance: How Play Flows

This page shows how the core ideas of Manifold connect.

You do not need to memorize this.

It exists so you can **see the whole loop at once**.

4.1 The Core Loop

CHARACTER DECLARATION

↓

VISIBLE STATE (State Sheets)

↓

PRESSURE & INSTABILITY

↓

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

↓

DICE (only if uncertainty remains)

↓

CHANGE TO STATE

(loop continues)

Nothing in Manifold happens outside this loop.

4.2 Step 1: Character Declaration

You begin by **declaring a shape**, not building a character.

You state: - What your character is capable of - Where they strain or break - What kinds of pressure affect them fastest

This establishes how the world can push back.

4.3 Step 2: Visible State

Everything that currently matters is written down as **State Sheets**.

State Sheets may be: - Public (everyone sees them) - Shared (table-facing) - Private (held by the GM)

Together, the *active* sheets describe the world *right now*.

If something is not on an active State Sheet, it is not shaping play.

4.4 Step 3: Pressure and Instability

As you act—or choose not to act—**pressure builds**.

Pressure represents strain.

If it accumulates too far, it can collapse into **instability**: - Loss of control - Messier outcomes - Fewer clean options

This is not punishment.

It is the world responding.

4.5 Step 4: Possible Outcomes

Before dice are rolled, the GM considers: - What outcomes are even possible - Which clean or controlled options are gone - What risks or costs are unavoidable

This set of possibilities is the **Outcome Space**.

State shapes this space.

4.6 Step 5: Dice (Only When Needed)

Dice are rolled **only if**: - More than one outcome is genuinely possible - The difference between them matters

Dice do not decide success or failure.

They help choose *which possible outcome occurs*.

4.7 Step 6: Change

Whatever happens: - State is updated - Pressure may be relieved or increased - New conditions may appear

Nothing resets.

The world remembers.

4.8 What This Means for You as a Player

- You are never rolling to ask permission
- Declaring limits makes your strengths real
- Consequences come from visible state, not surprise rulings
- The game stays fair because its memory is shared

If you can follow this loop, you understand Manifold.

This page is a map, not a rule. When in doubt, look at the State Sheets and ask what is under strain.

5 Player Appendix: New to Roleplaying? Start Here

This appendix is for you if: - You have never played a roleplaying game before, or - You are not sure what you are “supposed” to do, or - You are worried about doing it wrong

You are welcome here.

You do **not** need experience, rules knowledge, or acting skill.

You only need one thing.

5.1 Step One: Can You Pretend?

That’s it.

If you can: - Imagine being someone else - Make a choice as that person - Say what you try to do

You already know how to play.

Everything else is support.

5.2 What This Game Is

Manifold is a game where a group of people: - Imagine a world together - Play characters inside that world - Watch how the world changes because of what they do

There is a Game Master (GM).

Their job is to: - Describe the world - Keep track of what changes - Be fair about consequences

Your job is simpler.

5.3 Your Only Job as a Player

When it is your turn to act, you do this:

1. Listen to what is happening
2. Decide what your character wants to do
3. Say it out loud

That's it.

You do **not** need to: - Know rules - Roll dice on command - Speak in character voices

Plain language is perfect.

5.4 What You Say Matters

When you say what your character does, the GM listens.

They decide: - What makes sense - What could happen - Whether things are uncertain

Sometimes, they will ask you questions.

That's a good thing.

It means they are trying to understand your intent.

5.5 Sometimes Dice Are Used

Dice are not always used.

Dice only appear when: - More than one thing could reasonably happen, and - Which one happens matters

When dice are rolled: - You are not being tested - You are not being judged

The dice help decide *how* things turn out.

Not whether you were allowed to try.

5.6 You Cannot Break the Game

This is important.

You cannot: - Say the wrong thing - Make a bad choice - Ruin the story

Things going badly is part of play.

The world changing in unexpected ways is the point.

5.7 What Happens When Things Go Wrong

When something doesn't go your way: - Your character is not useless - You are not in trouble

Instead: - The situation changes - New problems appear - Different choices become important

The game keeps going.

5.8 You Share the World With Others

Other players are also pretending.

You do not need to compete with them.

You are playing *with* them.

Listen to their ideas.

Build on them when you can.

5.9 The Game Remembers

Manifold keeps track of what matters.

If something: - Hurts - Tires - Confuses - Complicates things

It may be written down.

This helps everyone remember what is true right now.

You do not need to track this yourself.

You can ask about it at any time.

5.10 You Are Allowed to Ask Questions

You can always ask: - “What do I see?” - “Would I know this?” - “What happens if I try?”

Asking questions is part of play.

5.11 You Don’t Need to Win

There is no score.

There is no right ending.

The goal is not to succeed.

The goal is to **see what happens**.

5.12 If You Remember One Thing

Remember this:

Say what you try to do.

Everything else will be handled together.

5.13 Welcome

If you can imagine, decide, and speak,

You are already playing Manifold.

The rest will come with time.