

CATASTROPHE

Catastrophe is a system-agnostic tool for players and GMs to experiment with dramatic character-building, psychology and story. It relies on the assumption that in a climactic moment, characters are faced with the truth of who they are. Whether they accept that truth, or reject it, defines whether their story results in a transformation (comedy) or a catastrophe (tragedy).



THINK 3 THOUGHTS (the conscious)

Thinking as your character, write down three observations about the world of the game:

Society is unfair; people cannot be trusted; the gods are bullies.

Work is fun; the poor deserve aid; family is important.

You can get weird with this - *trees are safe, hats are bad* - but try to have at least one serious offer. And keep them external - no 'I' language, that's next!

Tip: You might write down ten and pick your favourite three. Alternatively, a GM might pre-populate these for you, or fill a hat full of them and allow players to pick!

BELIEVE 1 BELIEF (the subconscious)

Now we can go internal. Form a single BELIEF that is consistent with the THOUGHTS above, worded thus:

I am generous / I am careful / I am wise.

A BELIEF is the basic cornerstone of your character's identity. Say it out loud, see how it feels:

'My name is Alannah. I am brave.'

This BELIEF is your character's motivation - their reason for doing things. They might choose to intimidate someone rather than persuade them because they believe they are scary; to translate the letter themselves rather than consult an expert because they believe they are all-knowing.

Tip: BELIEFS can of course be 'negative' - *I am thoughtless / I am ignorant* - but are harder to play.

FEEL 1 FEEL (the subconscious)

Now take your BELIEF, and flip it. Write down the strongest, clearest oppositional statement that you can think of:

I am strong <> I am weak.

I am generous <> I am selfish.

Say your BELIEF out loud, and feel your FEEL privately. Imagine this as a countercurrent to your BELIEF - or maybe the fear of this FEEL is what motivates your BELIEF. You might experience a little murmur of emotion - this is good!

Keep your FEEL a secret from other players. They will come to know your THOUGHTS as you express them, and understand your BELIEF through your actions.

Tip: Just as a BELIEF can be a negative, the FEEL can be a positive: *I am worthless <> I am capable.* The fear of capability makes your character feel worthless!

MECHANICS

At the start of the game, roll two six-sided dice and add two to the total. These are your BELIEF pips.

Whenever you take an ACTION (something that requires a roll) based on your BELIEF, you may spend a pip to add +1 to the roll.

You can increase the spend (and bonus!) by any amount, providing you have the pips to do so. So spend two pips for +2, three for +3, and so on. This represents how much you're relying on your belief in that moment.

If you succeed - great! Well done!
If you fail, add one pip to your FEEL.

Resting regains you one BELIEF pip. Phew!
The GM can also award BELIEF pips as you express your THOUGHTS throughout the game.
While resting, you can sacrifice a THOUGHT and develop a new one (based on your recent experiences) to gain another pip. This might make for a good scene to act out!



CRISIS:

If at any time your FEEL pips are greater than your BELIEF pips, your character undergoes a CRISIS: an extreme emotional state, prompted by a lack of BELIEF and an excess of FEEL:

'I have failed at being strong - am I actually weak?'

During the CRISIS, your character *cannot take any ACTION* (but may speak and move) until you do one of the following:

HOLD ON - CATASTROPHE

'I cannot be weak. The only way I can relate to the world is through my strength. I must be strong!'

You reject your FEEL, hold tight to your BELIEF. Roll a six-side die and regain that many BELIEF pips. The GM may now make a 'hard move' against you or one of your party - something bad happens, within the rules of the game. The more CATASTROPHES players trigger, the worse these outcomes should become.



LET GO - TRANSFORMATION

The first part is not pleasant. Delete all your THOUGHTS, and switch your BELIEF and FEEL.

'I am not strong. I am weak.'

From now on, every time you take an ACTION, apply -1 to the roll and remove a FEEL pip. When your FEEL pips are back to zero, you experience a moment of reversal, redemption, or realisation. You reconcile your internal conflict, accepting the FEEL you have so far denied.

Take a deep breath. Erase your BELIEF and FEEL, and gain an UNDERSTANDING that combines the two.

'I am not strong, but neither am I weak.'

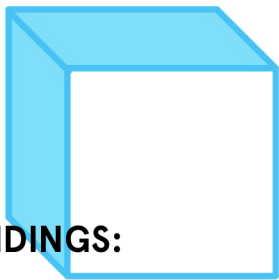
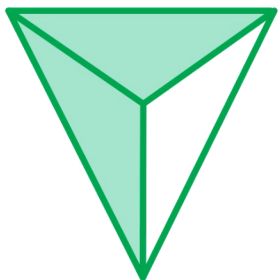
At the end of the adventure, your character must *choose whether to continue*. They have resolved the internal conflict that spurred them to adventure - what reason have they to go on? You might retire them, and use the opportunity to create a new character; the GM might have a character they'd like you to play. If, however, your character can find a strong reason to adventure, *translate that reason into a new BELIEF, flip it to make a new FEEL, and gain two six-sided dice worth of BELIEF pips*. (You keep your UNDERSTANDING.)

PLAYING THE CRISIS:

How long should your character remain in CRISIS? That's really up to you - your character might get back in the action instantly, or they might need four turns to rebalance (and it'll be nail-biting for your party). The period of inaction is really to give you an opportunity to 'play' the CRISIS.

Don't be afraid to express how it makes you/your character feel! If you don't feel confident vocalising your character's emotional state, describe how the CRISIS is affecting them physically. Your absence from the action of the game while you decide on a choice of action will prompt reactions from your fellow players too!

Tip: When coming out of a CRISIS, try to do it with an ACTION, rather than explaining why.



USING UNDERSTANDINGS:

An UNDERSTANDING is incredibly powerful. *Once per adventure*, a character can use an UNDERSTANDING to gain a significant bonus on an appropriate ACTION (or REACTION) - roll twice and pick the highest result. They might empathise with an NPC that shares their UNDERSTANDING, or resist an injury through their newfound mental fortitude!



GMs



YOUR ROLE:

Before the game begins, appraise yourself of each character's **THOUGHTS**, **BELIEFS** and **FEELS**. Understand that their **BELIEF** is always in conflict with their **FEEL**. Understand that by giving them opportunities to test their **BELIEF** you will bring them closer to confronting their **FEEL**, and that these moments will enliven the story. Your job, as well as running the adventure, is to provide these opportunities, and reward emotionally engaged, characterful play!

Tip: The advantage given to players by spending pips allows you to pit them more difficult challenges. A climactic confrontation with a powerful adversary can (and should) provide many moments for courting **CRISES**.

CHALLENGING BELIEFS:

At any time - provided it makes sense in the story - you can use an NPC's **ACTION** to **CHALLENGE** a character's **BELIEF**. In this instance, the player *must* spend at least one **BELIEF** pip on the roll, and will gain a **FEEL** pip if they fail.

A NOTE ON RULES:

These rules are tailored to mid-scale campaigns, but feel free to alter them! For a one-shot, roll one six-sided die for **BELIEF** pips. For a longer campaign, why not roll three or four?

These rules also assume that a +1 to a roll is a small bonus, a -1 is a small penalty, and rolling two dice and picking the best result is a significant bonus. If this feels unbalanced, change it!

Again, use this tool as much or as little as you like. You might ignore the mechanics entirely, and just have players define their **THOUGHTS**, **BELIEF** and **FEEL**.

Good luck and have fun!