

# CURLS - Casey's Universal Rules-Light System

A simple game system by Casey Garfield, suitable for any story and genre. These are the detailed rules (plaintext, small font version) - condensed rules and printable booklets/minizines are at [caseygarfield.co.uk/curls](http://caseygarfield.co.uk/curls)

## Why try CURLS?

- Quick & easy to learn, make characters and play
- Uses a d20, advantage/disadvantage, and critical successes/failures, but only needs one die and one simple type of roll
- Applies to any setting, story or genre

## What is CURLS?

CURLS is a TTRPG (tabletop role playing game) made by Casey Garfield. For those new to these games, CURLS defines a TTRPG as a way to collaboratively tell stories with a group, occasionally rolling dice to add an element of chance while seeing where the story goes.

Some TTRPG rules are made with certain stories in mind - developed to work for particular genres, like fantasy or mystery or romance. Some TTRPGs also generate or dictate the stories you play with them. CURLS is a system made for you to slap on top of any story you want to tell, instantly turning it into a game.

If you decide you want to play a game together that tells a certain kind of story and don't know what rules system would work for it? Try CURLS! If you want to play a new TTRPG, but some of your players find certain popular games too complicated and don't want to read a bunch of long hardback books? Try CURLS! If you want to learn a single set of rules that works as easily for a fantasy epic as it does a buddy comedy about bigfoot hunters or slice of life story about running a coffee shop, is easy to teach new players, and helps them make characters really quickly? Try CURLS!

## Character creation

Like most TTRPGs, in CURLS one player acts as the Game Master (GM) and the others create a character to play - more on that later!

To make a character, CURLS has players write a short character description, small enough to fit on a post it note. This serves as all of their skills/stats - in TTRPG terms, it's their character sheet.

Players should list two or three things their character is experienced at or skilled in, and at least one flaw. It can be nice to write these into full sentences, but it works just as well as bulletpoints.

At the start of the game, players will read this to introduce their characters, and it also affects the gameplay throughout.

### Examples:

*"Null Seraph watched the movie Hackers as a kid and based their entire life around it. They're skilled with tech and social engineering because of their experience hacking, and they've got some chemistry experience from researching DIY hormone therapy. They think their tattoos, piercings and faux-hawk are awesome, and they love looking visibly trans, but it really makes them stand out. Sometimes people can be suspicious or hostile towards them for it."*

*"Let me tell you about Lewis Tillman. He works for a terrible 24-hour sandwich shop, taking antisocial hours to fit around his second job as an overworked youth worker at an underfunded charity. Both of them pay terribly, so he runs a side hustle selling bone jewellery to witches on Etsy when he should be sleeping. It leaves him totally exhausted."*

*"So he's experienced at anything you'd do often in those jobs, but being so tired means he probably can't think quickly, might not be so up to physical exertion, stuff like that?"*

*"You get it!"*

*"Puncho is a fighter. Good at hitting, yelling, scaring people. Bad with patience and emotional vulnerability. Let's do this."*

## Character stats

When players have to roll dice to decide what happens in the game, they can suggest reasons their characters would have an advantage in the situation based on their character description.

For example, a character who's been described as really strong might have an easier time smashing a door down. It doesn't have to be that directly related though - if characters are trying to reason with an NPC who is especially angry or stressed, a player who wrote that their character works as a nurse could argue they have a lot of experience talking people down from high-pressure situations, or a character who's a parent might use the same skills they use on a toddler having a tantrum.

If the GM feels a player has made a good enough argument that their character should have an advantage in a situation, the player gets advantage on their roll. In the same way, if the GM feels a character's flaw would put them at a disadvantage, the player has disadvantage on that roll.

The GM has final say on what affects the roll, but everyone playing the game is part of the conversation about advantage and disadvantage. Anyone can suggest reasons a character's strengths or flaws might come into play, and if the GM thinks a reason isn't quite good enough to get advantage, they can invite everyone to join in with workshopping the reason until it convinces them.

## Optional rules: Extra traits

If you want to make things tougher for your character, you can add more flaws. Your group might decide it would be more fun to make things more challenging for everyone, or one player might decide they want to make their character an absolutely dreadful little failure who the world is against. Either way, feel free to tweak the numbers of strengths and flaws!

As long as everyone playing agrees it's fair and fun, there's no reason you can't have extras of either trait, or even that every character has to have the same number or distribution. CURLS works just as well for an adventure following evenly matched characters as it does for a team of superheroes with 5 powers each, all trying to protect one normal guy with 10 flaws and no redeeming qualities.

## Playing the game

Standard TTRPG fare applies here - this is a collaborative storytelling game where all but one player plays the Player Characters they made, who are the main characters in the story, while one player serves as the Game Master, overseeing the setting and playing all the other characters the PCs interact with.

When telling your story together, a lot of the time, you'll just say what happens. If a character wants to go to a shop, they just do that unless something gets in the way. Sometimes though, they might have to get to a shop by making their way through a city they don't know while being chased by a threat, which is when things get trickier.

If a character is doing something where the outcome is uncertain and it's more interesting to roll dice to decide what happens, the GM can ask a player to roll dice to see what happens next.

Unlike in games like D&D though, every player gets to be part of a conversation about how rolls will go, rather than the GM holding all of that power and pressure.

## Setting up rolls

Every time a player rolls to decide what happens next, there should be a good and a bad thing that could follow. Both of these outcomes should be able to move the story forward. If there can't be both a good or a bad outcome, or if you can't think of how one result would move the story forward, it probably shouldn't be a roll.

For example, your story might have a boulder blocking a cave the characters want to enter, so a strong character tries to move it. In some TTRPGs, they succeed if the player rolls well, or if they roll badly, they simply fail to move the boulder. Nothing happens, there's no meaningful outcome, and they can just try again and again until they succeed, doing nothing but passing time. This isn't interesting, and hasn't changed anything or moved the story forward.

In CURLS, the GM should either simply let the player do this because their character is strong enough, or make the roll interesting with a good and bad outcome. Maybe you decide there are dangerous animals around the area, and struggling to move the boulder would create a lot of noise and movement which draws their attention.

Maybe failing would cause the tunnel to collapse, taking that path away or leaving them stranded. Maybe there's a time pressure, like the characters being chased, and failing to move the boulder also costs them precious time, causing their pursuers to catch up to them.

In all of these examples there's a reason to roll dice to see which outcome happens, either outcome is interesting, and a bad outcome still moves the story forward instead of only being the absence of a good outcome.

Characters should never be in the same position after a roll - something should always change as a result. Because something interesting always happens and we're all here to tell interesting stories together, there's no real "bad" rolls for players, just outcomes that aren't what the characters had planned.

### **Making rolls**

All rolls in CURLS use a twenty sided die (d20) to decide if the good or bad outcome happens, as well as how it happens.

If the player rolls an even number, the good outcome happens. If they roll an odd number, the bad outcome happens.

Within these good or bad outcomes, it can go well, or it can go terribly. The higher your roll is from 1 - 20, the better it goes for you. That means even though all evens are successes and all odds are failures, you can succeed well, succeed badly, fail well, or fail badly. A 2 is the worst that succeeding can possibly go, and a 19 is failing in the best way you possibly can.

A good outcome going badly might look like successfully moving a boulder that blocked a cave entrance, but taking a long time to do it and injuring your back in the process. If you're running away from something, it could have made significant progress towards catching up to you in that time. A bad outcome going well might look like failing to move a boulder out of the way to access a cave because you were so strong you caused the cave to collapse, but that feat of strength could impress or intimidate people around you. If you were trying to leave an area, impressed locals might lead you to a new way forward, as long as you use your strength to do them a favour. If you were trying to escape a threat, the newly intimidated threat might interact with you differently, even though it caught up to you because you failed to move the boulder.

This system allows for critical successes and critical failures - rolling a 20 is a success *and* the best it could possibly go, while a 1 is a failure *and* the most disastrous outcome that could possibly happen. Go as dramatic as your group likes for these.

If this is different to other games you've played and takes some getting used to, that's okay! Setting the stakes like this is also a conversation with everyone playing, so you can help each other create and workshop ideas for outcomes.

### **Advantage & disadvantage**

If a character has advantage, their player rolls an extra d20 and gets to pick which result to use. If a character has disadvantage and no advantage, their player rolls an extra d20 and has to pick the worst result. An odd number is always considered worse than an even, and if they're both odd or both even, pick the lower number. If you have both an advantage and a disadvantage, a disadvantage cancels out an advantage.

### **Optional rules: Extra traits**

If you're playing with extra numbers of traits, so there's lots of possible experiences and flaws, you might have multiple advantages and disadvantages at once. Decide early on (either before playing or the first time it comes up) how you want to handle this situation. CURLS presents three options: You can only have one advantage or disadvantage at a time; each advantage adds an extra roll and each disadvantage takes one away (so 4 advantages and 2 disadvantages means roll 2 dice and pick the best option); or any situation where both advantage and disadvantage is present cancels out into a single normal roll. Pick the solution that works best for your group, then use that one consistently for the rest of the game.

## **That's it!**

Now you know how to make characters, introduce them at the start of play, tell a story until you get to a dice roll and roll the dice, everything else about how your game goes is up to you and your fellow players.

Figuring out how to fail well or succeed badly might be an adjustment if you're used to games that are more absolute, but it quickly gets easier once you've tried it a few times! Bringing everyone in the game into a conversation about what a 15 looks like quickly goes from being something unusual to a fun way to tell a good story that everyone feels part of, taking some of the pressure off the GM while helping all of the players feel involved.

## **Credit**

CURLS is heavily inspired by / based on the brilliant game [Ah, Dang! Mothman Won't Move Out \(He Said It Was Just For The Weekend\)](#) by Paul "Ettin" Matijevic, which introduced me to the idea of character creation being as simple as listing things a character is good at, as well as dice rolls involving creating a good and bad outcome which could result in failing well or succeeding badly. It did it in different ways, using two 6 sided dice for rolls, and the game is made to tell a story about making Mothman move out. If you aren't familiar with the game already, I think it's well worth playing both.

CURLS is basically just one person's attempt to present Ah, Dang! Mothman... 's ideas to new people, put them in a 'white label' game you can apply to any genre/story, and add everyone's favourite bits from d20 systems like D&D and Pathfinder into a simpler game while I was at it. Huge credit, recognition and thanks go to Paul Matijevic (aka Ettin64), who created the foundation CURLS was built on.

Thanks to the playtesters of this game: Nik Ward and George Higham (who used CURLS to play a House MD inspired medical drama); Izzie Porter, Luke Porter and Ciaran Fallon (who used CURLS to play ???); and Oliver Russell and Ryan McGee (who used CURLS to play ???).

## **About Casey Garfield (the Casey from Casey's Universal Rules-Light System)**

Casey Garfield is primarily a poet, but often branches into other work, like games such as 'CURLS' and 'The Party Is Over (& You Are Alone)'. More info about them and their other work - including a solo journaling RPG, an Alternate Reality Game, and poetry collections - can be found at [www.caseygarfield.co.uk](http://www.caseygarfield.co.uk)