

Caldera

Adventures in Emotional Sense-making

What is Caldera?

INTRODUCTION

Caldera is a larp format for games about a specific type of experience: the fraught and painful adventure we experience when we dive into a messy, discordant, complicated, and often repressed section of our past.

Long ago, something happened that broke our world and destabilized our identity. We moved on by pushing parts of our memories aside and making do with a few pieces that remain. During the game, the characters return to confront the past, access those lost parts of themselves, and reinterpret the past in search of peace or catharsis.

Please note that Caldera assumes familiarity and/or experience with emotional sense-making around trauma, and will not teach this material. Beginner-friendly characters are often available, see game master.

THE PAST LIES IN PIECES

The core premise of the game is that, in the course of trauma, memory has been broken. Characters have ignored, repressed, and/or forgotten major aspects of their previous life—people, events, facts, etc—because of (sometimes subtle) pain surrounding those elements. Opening those doors will draw metaphorical blood, but nonetheless they are here to open them.

Over the course of play, characters will be presented with new information about their past selves. The adventure consists of each person exploring this memory landscape that they do not control in order to piece together a new narrative about the past that they can live with—or not.

FACTS ARE FLUID

Where classic larp will often enforce a single shared factual backstory, *Caldera* does not. Characters often have blatantly contradictory memories that cannot be resolved. Key evidence doesn't exist. The past can never fully be recovered.

Instead, characters must simply *decide* what to believe in order to satisfy their emotional needs. There is no one to gainsay the story who is not in the room.

FEELINGS ARE FIXED

If backstory reality is fluid, and identity is shattered, what gives a character cohesive form? The thing that is most real to *Caldera* characters is their feelings. Each character is grounded in what they feel from moment to moment, day to day; they are balls of emotion moving by instinct.

CALDERA IS FANTASY

It is important to note that, while *Caldera* is a game about a real psychological phenomenon, it is *not a realistic portrayal* of it. Like any other type of genre fiction, *Caldera* exaggerates and simplifies these dynamics for the sake of storytelling, drama, and fun, turning a journey of many years into a few hours.

Inhabiting A Character

EMOTIONAL ROOTS

In absence of factually consistent backstory, characters' cohesion depends on *emotional consistency*. The heart of a character is the *root emotion*, denoted by “Yet a part of you always feels...” on your character sheet. Play by taking on that emotion and/or calling it up within yourself as a player, and then use your personal emotional instincts to guide the character from there.

Caldera relies *very heavily* on the notion of *bleeding in*, where player feelings inform characterization. Think of the character as a garment worn on top of each player's own emotional landscape: each of us as players experiences these feelings differently, and your unique take on it fills the substance of the character. (Just as our player intellect might inform character intellect.)

That said, characters' inner lives will develop over time. The root represents how the character has felt for years, but it may or may not shift over play.

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USING CHARACTER SHEETS

You have two character sheets, representing the character's present life and their past. Both will contain questions that you should answer to customize the character. It's important to complete the present life sheet before moving on to the past one, though you may revise the present sheet answers afterwards.

When responding, feel free to draw heavily from your own emotional landscape and/or use the most obvious answer. There is no need to think of something unique or clever—the better tailored the character is to your landscape, the easier it will be to bleed in freely, supply a lot of content, and thereby focus on the more complex parts of gameplay. For this reason, feel free to also adjust the root to better fit you: fit is more important than being true to the document.

BE RESPECTFUL

Because of the way we inhabit characters, it is *especially crucial* that we treat one another kindly as players. Be respectful. Pay attention to boundaries or signs of potential discomfort. Do not judge or comment upon how another player chooses to represent their character, even in jest.

Playing the Game

TRANSLATE FEELINGS INTO ACTION

Each character is trying to make the world work for them by shaping it out of the other characters. Consider how your feelings might manifest themselves in the world of actions, physical or social, and take that step. Where possible, process "out loud" through acting on others.

Feel free to take major actions very early in game: a few minutes of immediate action can lead to an hour of processing, which is the meat of the game.

PRESS INTO EACH OTHER

Because of fragmented identities, *Caldera* characters can actually withstand a

higher amount of pressure than in a classic game. Reduce your inhibitions against imposing on or hurting other characters. The game counts on you to reach out for communication and intimacy, lash out in instinctive aggression, and/or place others in difficult or dire circumstances. Because of other rules, doing these things will never remove opportunities for gameplay for others (see Action & Violence, next page).

OBSERVE CORELEVANCE

Corelevance is a sense of narrative gravity that keeps characters coming back to one another for all significant interactions without concern for plausibility. If you are in love, if you are bitter, if you share vulnerability, if you lash out, all of these will always be directed at other characters in play.

In absence of consistent factual backstory, Corelevance binds characters to one another and keeps everyone playing the same game. Everyone we need is in the room. Perhaps the best person to understand you is an enemy or stranger.

Play using corelevance this way: begin with a feeling, instinctively pick a target for it, and then immediately dive into a scene to explore. Work out through play how and why the feeling applies to the target. (By contrast, do not start out with the reason, intellectually derive the target, then derive how you feel.)

ALL SECRETS MUST BE REVEALED

All secrets must be revealed within 20 - 40 mins of when they first come up. A secret comes up when a) it is a new piece of information that is assigned to your character during game, b) you have told a lie about it, or c) an interaction occurs where the secret is relevant for any reason.

INTERNAL ROLEPLAY

Because much of a character's journey is internal, it is encouraged to have long periods where you are not doing very much externally. Feel free to take as much time as you need to roleplay with no one but yourself. If you wish to make a soliloquy to facilitate this, get the GM to be your audience.

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Actions & Events

Artifacts of the Fiction

USING ARTIFACTS OF THE FICTION

An *Artifact of the Fiction* is a genre convention. It is a piece of reality that, within the context of the game, all characters simply accept to be true. Clarifying artifacts allows gameplay to focus on exploring other areas.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS TOO DRAMATIC / INTENSE

Just as no duel can have too many flourishes in an adventure, there is no such thing as emotional interaction that is too melodramatic in *Caldera*. Unrealistically intense situations are wonderful. Embrace cliche. Don't act farcically, but do make dramatic speeches on cliffs at swordpoint. Example genres with comparable drama include anime, wuxia, and fantasy.

EVERYONE HAS FORGOTTEN CRITICAL THINGS

Because the game is about repression, all characters will have forgotten important things, beyond realistic plausibility. We just don't question this.

THINGS HAPPEN TONIGHT

If things are to be done, they will be done tonight, even though there is technically no pressure against resolving them later.

Action & Violence

"I MOVE TO" RESOLUTION

Each player has complete control over everything that happens to their character. When trying to take an action that affects another character, act out the action while saying, "I move/try to...{action}". The other play responds by acting out and describing an outcome which can be the intended one, a different one, or even a more extreme one.

Example:

A: I swing at you, trying to drive you off the edge of the cliff.

B: You hit me in the head. I fall over backwards, and I'm now lying at the edge.

A: I move to pin you to the ground, hit you, and draw blood.
B: Yes, I'm bleeding and for the moment I am in your power.
{dialogue ensues}

To try to kill another character, simply say, "I move to kill you," and let the other player decide what happens. A player may also choose for their own character to die in response to an action that is *not* an attempt to kill, causing the other character to kill them by accident.

REACTING TO SCENES

If a scene, meaning a conversation or action, is taking place, each character must be in one of the following states:

- Participating
- Actively roleplaying alone or with others about watching the events unfold.
- Standby: an individual time freeze representing intent to participate or intervene, but paused to allow the scene to play out further first.
- Completely ignoring it to have a different scene

Characters may *not* passively observe scenes without internal roleplay or Standby. When trying to intervene in a scene, use Standby to intervene in the *last* possible moment, instead of jumping in at the *first* possible moment. As events unfold, characters may opt to leave Standby without ever participating.

AVOID INTERRUPTING

Where possible, avoid interrupting other scenes unless it is pressing or adds value. Instead, make eye contact with and point to the person you need to talk with to indicate you want them as soon as they are ready.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS CAN GO ON FOREVER

Social / emotional interaction can go on indefinitely surrounding action. If you are about to kill someone, you could literally spend an hour of the game poised to strike near them as you both work out all of the rest of your issues first.