



Building Beliefs

In this section, we attempt to distill five years of advice about writing Beliefs. Pray for our immortal souls.

Belief versus Situation

You cannot write Beliefs in a vacuum. Before Beliefs are put to paper, the GM and players agree to the rough action, the situation. Situation includes a bit of the setting, the player characters, antagonists and a problem or two that can't be ignored.

Once you have your situation, the players must bind their characters into it. How are you going to change this situation? What must be done right away? If a player has trouble answering those two questions concretely—including a character, a setting element and a problem—then the situation is lacking. The GM must review the situation and tighten it up. He must make it more threatening, impossible to ignore, but not so pressing that the game is going to end in the first session.

The cost for ignoring situation isn't the end of the road, rather it causes the antagonist's plans to evolve. While the players dawdle, the villain gains. The situation becomes more grim. The idea is that if the players fail to stop the initial problem, the antagonist changes the setting to his benefit. He takes over. He ruins lives. He murders loved ones. He steals ancient artifacts. He rewrites law. He enslaves nations. His work is never finished in the first session. If the situation is ignored (or if challenges are failed), the Big Picture is threatened.

Your first Belief always refers to this situation. It describes your view of it and how you're going to tackle it. Are you opposed? Why? What action will you take to stop it?



Intraparty Beliefs

The other players at the table present other opportunities for Beliefs. During play, you interact with them more than anything else in the game. Each of you has your own opinions and methods. Each player has his perspective on the history, behavior or actions of the other players' characters. And each player is taking action in the situation. You may find those actions compelling and want to help. Or you may find their actions offensive and wish to thwart them.

Write your second Belief about another player character. What intrigues you about him? What offends you? How will you help him? How will you hinder him?

One-on-One Games

In one-on-one games, the GM is the "other player" mentioned above. The GM must present a compelling, recurring allied NPC about whom the player cares.

Ethical or Philosophical Stances

Some of my favorite Beliefs contain no goal or opinion, no action at all. They are philosophical guides. They are the moral underpinning of the character. These are by far the hardest Beliefs to write. Not that you can't come up with a fascinating statement of your philosophy. On the contrary, that's the easy part. The difficulty lays in application. If poorly conceived, these Beliefs are too easy to ignore. And if you're ignoring one of your Beliefs, you're carrying around deadweight.

Make your third Belief an ethical, moral or philosophical statement. For the best effect, write it so that it can be contradicted. It's easy to say that you believe in God or good, but it's not easy to challenge a Belief like that. A slightly more nuanced Belief like "As a faithful man, I should sacrifice myself for the greater good," tells us more about the character and allows for the statement to be tested. Just how much of yourself will you sacrifice? Try not to have more than one of your Beliefs be an ethical statement.

The Fourth Belief

Loyal, Zealot and other similar traits grant characters a fourth Belief. According to the rules, the Belief must tie into the nature of the trait. And the rules for the traits say that if the Belief is changed, the trait is lost.





This might sound contradictory, but you can change the Belief. What I meant to say was that you lose the trait if you use the Belief slot for anything aside from a Belief relating to the trait.

If you're Loyal, but your master is killed, you can take on a new master and write a new Loyal Belief about it.

Often players write two-part Beliefs into these slots: "I believe strongly in this thing, therefore I must..." You can keep the declarative statement and change the action to reflect your current situation.

Give and Take

When you start a Burning Wheel game, the GM presents a situation building on the Big Picture and the characters. You write your Beliefs based on those elements. The GM then presents scenes or actions to challenge those Beliefs.

The game proceeds based on your decisions and the results of the tests—pass or fail. Based on your actions, a new circumstance will arise. The situation will change. You will have a new opinion about this situation. Some Beliefs will be fulfilled by the developments of the ongoing game. Write new ones based on the new circumstance.

Some Beliefs will be engaged but left incomplete. Tweak them so they reflect the current situation. And some Beliefs will lay inactive. Talk to the GM and the other players about these. Is the story headed in that direction? If it is, keep the Belief. If you are clinging to something that the game has moved past, change it.

Belief-Building Tips

Beliefs are a principled to-do list. The most common problem we see with Beliefs is that they either have an ideology but no action, or an action without a driving ideology. Each Belief needs a to-do so it's clear when the character is pursuing his Belief and he can earn artha, and each Belief needs an ideology to back it up so the action has context.

Red Flags

If the players don't know what they're supposed to be doing right now, their Beliefs are broken. The situation and buy-in are probably deficient in this case, too.



If the players aren't earning at least one fate point per session for pursuing their Beliefs, their Beliefs are lacking.

If the players haven't completed a Belief and earned a persona point within a session or two, their Beliefs lack urgency. Not broken, but potentially stagnant. To earn persona points, try to break your goal-oriented Beliefs down into smaller steps.

Inner Conflict

By design, Beliefs provide an opportunity for a player to evoke the inner turmoil of his character. You have three Beliefs rather than one so you can counterpose them. You are supposed to have differing or conflicting opinions about various elements of the game. Your actions in the situation may contravene your philosophy. In play, as the action rises, you get to decide which is more important to you. Play out the turmoil in a dramatic fashion and you'll earn artha for Moldbreaker as well as for playing your other Belief or accomplishing a goal.

Direction

You can use Beliefs to set your character on an arc—transformation from neophyte to master, from worm to hero, from child to adult and even from hero to something more.

Ethical statements are one tool for setting such directions. You play them now, but you plan on growing past them in future play. In fact, you can make ethical statements now and set yourself to move into direct conflict with that stance later. I can say, "I will never raise my hand in violence." I can play a pacifist in the moment. However, my plan can be for this peaceful man to transform in the course of play into a cold-blooded killer.

Of course, there is a danger of playing your character too rigidly—locking him into a predetermined course. To prevent this, stay open to the possibilities that arise in play. Consider the events of the game and how they affect your character's perception. Be prepared for unexpected change.

I recently played a character who I planned to transform from a pacifist to a martial master. But after seeing the woman he loved killed before him—struck down by the curses of an angry god—his goals seemed hollow. It's time to readjust and choose another long-term arc for him. Perhaps he'll devote himself to the faith or to medicine. Perhaps his heart is broken and he determines never to return home again.





Goal-Oriented Beliefs

It is a good habit to shape one Belief so that you can accomplish it in this session. It might not happen, but you should try for it. Shooting for the Personal Goals award keeps you active and engaged.

What's an Appropriate Goal?

Goals are relative things. In game terms, a goal must require action from the player—he must risk for his Belief. At minimum, one test must be made in pursuit of the goal. It is preferable that a series of tests are made, but there is no hard formula.

Remember, our motto is “Fight for what you believe.” If a player isn't fighting, then the game isn't delivering on its promise. Therefore, as a GM, you must place a challenge in the path of each Belief: an opponent to overcome, a confidante to be convinced, an artifact to be rescued, a mystery to be solved or even a dangerous cliff to be scaled.

These elements are born from the Big Picture. They are facets of the setting that you pull from the background and place into the foreground.

It should be feasible to accomplish goals in a session or two.

Reconciling Two-Part Beliefs

Two-part Beliefs are very useful because they allow you to maintain your philosophical stance but to change up what you're going to do about it. When the action portion is invalidated or the goal accomplished, you can keep the ideological statement and change the action or goal. “I am loyal to the king, therefore I will...” has huge potential for play. What will you do for the king? Keep your statement of loyalty and as the situation changes, insert new actions into the Belief. Now you get a fresh persona point from it in play!

Ye Olde “fourth Beliefs” from Loyal, Zealot and similar traits are often two-part Beliefs and thus fall into this category.

Practical Beliefs

This section breaks down some issues with Beliefs in Burning Wheel: trouble writing Beliefs, writing Beliefs for a campaign, changing Beliefs during a campaign, what to do when you earn Moldbreaker, what to



do when you've finished with a Belief, how to play a Belief that can't be accomplished and some practical advice on challenging Beliefs in general.

Trouble Writing Beliefs

If one of your players is having trouble writing Beliefs, try to get something down on paper, anything that's even close to the concept. Don't worry about getting it perfect out of the gate. Have him write a Belief that you know will need to change.

During the session, be prepared to confront him with a handful of decisions. Use your own inspiration and ideas for the situation to prod the half-baked Belief. Set up a problem that can't be solved in a single roll. When the player grabs for the dice, stop him. Nail down the intent and task for this test, and ask him what he wants to accomplish by the end of the session. Have him write this statement as a Belief.

At the end of the session, be sure this player gets artha appropriate for the Belief. Break down the reward process. Let the player know why he's earning these strange little points. This will close part of the cycle for him—he should understand now that if he acts on his Beliefs, he'll get rewarded in a way that will allow him to act more effectively next time.

Writing Beliefs for a Campaign

You want to topple the duke, but it's going to take many sessions of play to get there. You can write a Belief that states, "I must overthrow the duke no matter the cost." This is a nice, strong Belief, but it's very hard to earn rewards for it. In the short term, you've got to constantly push against the duke or his works. This will probably get you a handful of fate points. Ultimately, after many sessions of work, you'll accomplish this goal (or die trying). That'll net you one persona point, not an adequate reward for all your effort.

It's best to break that long-term goal into bits that you can accomplish in the short term. "I will rob the duke's treasury of every penny." Or, "I will kidnap the duke's brother, Baron Evil Crown the Bad, and hold him for ransom." Or, "I will embarrass the duke at court when the prince comes." Assume for the sake of argument, that these instances are not long-term, campaign-spanning goals, but scenarios that you can accomplish in a session or two of play.





Writing strong, goal-oriented Beliefs allows you stay on track for your larger aims, earn lots of artha (to be saved for that final confrontation, of course) and have many exciting sessions en route to your goal.

Changing Beliefs During a Campaign

When do you change a Belief? In the rules as written, you can change one at any point as long as the GM approves the timing. However, we rarely change Beliefs during a session. We prefer to let them be challenged in the course of the session. If we can't challenge a Belief in a session, we reexamine it. At BWHQ, we change Beliefs at the start of a session. We review what happened last time we played. We state where we are now and what we plan on doing. If goal-oriented Beliefs were accomplished in the previous session, we change or update them. If ideologies were challenged or crushed, we change them to suit our new outlooks. If we have a Belief that's not being challenged, we try to rework it so it can be more rewarding.

On rare occasions, an earth-shattering event will rock one of the players. Something snaps. He's got to make a change right now. This moment is perhaps one of the most powerful in all of Burning Wheel. By all means, go with inspired changes of Beliefs!

Sometimes, a Belief needs to sit in reserve for a session or two before you can really dig into it. That's perfectly acceptable. It's rare that a single session challenges all of the players' Beliefs. But if a couple of sessions pass without the Belief being touched, then you need to change it.

In campaign play, if you're playing hard with goal-oriented Beliefs, you'll probably also have far-reaching goals that aren't appropriate for a Belief. Or you'll agree to accept a side mission to help a friend—to help accomplish another player's goal. You need to write a Belief about this goal, so what do you do with the Belief that you're replacing? We keep notes on the backs of our character sheets about long-term goals. So if we need to clear a Belief slot for a short-term goal, we can do so without fear of forgetting our big plans.

When the immediate situation is resolved, we refer to the notes, make sure they're still germane and then write new Beliefs for them.

When to Say No to Changing a Belief

It's possible, in the course of a session, for the GM to have an unrevealed obstacle waiting to challenge a Belief. If this is the case, and a player asks to change the Belief that is about to be challenged, the GM can and should advise him to wait. Only delay the change of



the Belief if you can challenge it this session. If you can't get to it this session, let the player change it.

Moldbreaker

The Moldbreaker reward is a powerful tool in long-term play. You can earn this reward in a very self-conscious way. You are in control of when you play into or when you break a Belief. Breaking a Belief isn't the same as disregarding it for convenience's sake. You must dive into the drama, and play against yourself. For your troubles, you earn a nice persona point.

What to do with the Belief after you've broken it? Do you discard it? No. You keep it. Breaking it convincingly shows how much you truly care about that ideal. You return to the Belief and play it earnestly, like a man shamed by his own actions so he resolves stalwartly to do good from now on. Your transgression reaffirms your Belief.

We talk about Moldbreaker a bit more in the Artha chapter. But to briefly repeat what's said there: If you find yourself repeatedly breaking a Belief, then it's time to change it.

Finishing a Belief

When we accomplish a goal related to a Belief in a game, we have a short conversation. The GM asks, "Are you done with that? Do you want to push that further?" Remember, the GM's job is to challenge Beliefs. Even if a situation is resolved, it's possible that the Belief isn't resolved with it. A Belief may take on new meaning in the resolution of the action. It's up the player to decide.

On the other hand, the GM has to be honest. If he has inspiration for more action behind a Belief, then he should say so. And if he doesn't, he should tell the player, "I feel like you're done with that. I don't have anything else. Do you agree?"

If the player and GM don't agree, discuss the problem and work out an appropriate direction. You can modify the situation or create a new one to accommodate the Belief.

Guiding Light Beliefs

A guiding light Belief is one that is not accomplishable by any means. It provides an ethical rule upon which the player can measure his character's actions. At BWHQ, we try to discourage these Beliefs in new players. They're hard to play and hard to challenge. However, for a skilled Burning Wheel player, they're a lot of fun. Guiding light Beliefs





help you “get into character.” They encourage you to offer a different perspective on the situation. If you have a Belief like “I must never raise my hand in violence again, since I have been forced to slay mine own brother,” how are you going to topple the duke?

Guiding light Beliefs that ascribe to an ideology—“I will abide by the precepts of Nurgle’s church,” for example—are colorful but difficult to play. Behind these Beliefs lays an ideological system. The player must carry this ideology in his thoughts while he plays and be ready to spout those precepts and abide by them! On the other hand, as the GM, you must also know these principles. You must be ready to offer situations that directly contradict them or present options in which one way contravenes the ideology and the other venerates it. This is quite a challenge to bring out during gameplay.

As the GM, I find that not only do I have to present nuanced situations, but I often have to remind players of their own ideologies! “Really, you’re going to do that? I thought that was against your religion.” So take care with these Beliefs. It’s okay for each player to have one, but no more. When getting started with the game, try to focus on goal-oriented Beliefs. You can develop these deeper, more nuanced Beliefs in play.

Practical Advice on Challenging Beliefs

Here are some practical perspectives on challenging Beliefs. They were presented to us by Michael Prescott on our forums.

A player has the Belief “I must kill that bastard Mordock.” Here are a number of ways you can challenge that one Belief using different perspectives on the character Mordock.

- *Validation.* Make Mordock super villainous, mean to children, etc. to validate the worthiness of the Belief.
- *Undermining.* Make Mordock a super nice guy, someone nobody in their right mind would want to kill. The player has a chance to define his character by the unreasonable pursuit of his goal.
- *Flip.* Switch from validating to undermining, or vice versa. Have the villain repent and beg for mercy—now the long-validated player has to risk looking murderous to complete his goal.
- *Opposition.* Make Mordock hard to kill, in logistical terms. He has henchmen, powerful allies, etc. so that once he’s dead, it feels like a big accomplishment.



- *Catch-22*. Make gunning for Mordock costly in terms of the player's other Beliefs. For example, if the player has a Belief about curing his sister's terminal illness, Mordock is the only guy who can cure her.
- *Divide and Conquer*. Like *Catch-22*, but you cause interplayer friction by finding ways to get other players to oppose the player with the belief to bring down Mordock. For example, Mordock is the only person who can teach the players the secrets of Enchanting.
- *Merge*. Create harmony in the group by making Mordock's death a means of accomplishing other goals. Perhaps Mordock also has the Black Chalice, something that another player needs.

Try to imagine your players' Beliefs in this scheme. What's the common goal they share? What are their secondary goals? How can you tie the secondary goals back into the common goal? Can you use the secondary goals as obstacles to accomplishing the common goal?

What's the mood of the table? Do they universally hate one of the antagonists? Can you turn him into a sympathetic villain and thereby challenge all of their Beliefs by causing them to question their goals?

Michael's simple scheme for challenging Beliefs helps frame things into a pattern of easily executed actions. How do your group's goals fit into this scheme?

