

Lemmings

a Roleplaying Game to Introduce Roleplaying
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What is a Roleplaying-Game?

This game assumes that you have read Jeff Moore's article [Roleplaying in the Computer Age](#). The thematic of this game is to have some insight into the act of role-playing.

In order to play this game you need some players, one of them have to be the GM (from now on I don't call the GM a player), some sheets of papers, pen or pencil and a deck of cards. Every player gets a sheet of paper on which he/she can describe the traits and abilities of his/her character. It is called the character sheet.

The golden rule for this RPG: **"If in doubt, ask the GM!"**

About the Computer Game and the Animal

If you don't know the video game Lemmings, the game loses some of its point, but it can be still interesting especially if you wonder about or are interested in roleplaying.

Attention! The suicidal behavior of the lemmings is a myth generated by the Oscar-winning Walt Disney documentary "White Wilderness". The PC game and this tabletop roleplaying-game are both based upon this myth.

The Kingdom of the Animals

Some animals from the Kingdom of Animals travel far far away to claim the fire that is possessed only by the humans and the gods of the humans. As they arrive at the fire they don't know what to do to catch it, and meanwhile it reminds them of their old brothers, the lemmings.

The lemmings are a dead species that once lived in peace in the wilderness, but it wasn't enough for them, they longed for success and happiness without the striving and struggle they had to do in their short lives. They had stories passed on from parents to children about a mythical city of happiness and peace. They didn't know where it is except for the cryptic hints of their legends. But they put great trust in their own powers and had proud leaders and strong heroes, hence they departed for a better world and got on the road. They had a long and difficult journey but at the end they didn't find the city they longed for, but they found death and not only death, but extinction.

And the fire told them stories about the long journey of the lemmings to buy time before they claim it, and the animals all took up roles of famous lemming heroes.

The players' characters are the animals and the GM plays the fire. The characters are also roleplaying: the fire is the GM and the animals are the players. Hence the players of this game has to play the roles of animals that are playing lemmings. They try to play the lemming heroes faithfully and not let their characteristics in the way.

The Adventures

The GM has to coordinate the adventures that way that you can finish every one in a single game session. The journey is happening in the wilderness, but can certainly cross any terrain. An adventure is some bigger hindrance or obstacle that the lemming population have to fight in order to continue their journey. It can be a wide river or a high cliff or a small town in which the people have something against lemmings. All the same, the lemmings are stuck and they rely on their heroes, the players' characters' characters (in short: the lemming characters) to do something.

The first resources that the lemmings have are manpower (or "lemming"-power for that matter). The heroes task is to mobilize the other lemmings to get other resources for example gather wood to build a bridge. Or even better to connect the beavers nearby to help to fell some trees. The ideas are up to the players and the possibilities are up to the GM. But always remember: the lemming population is huge and these adventures are a part of a far longer journey.

Because every adventure is only one session short, the players have a freedom. You don't have to play the adventures in order, you don't even have to play with the same lemmings. Even if you play the same animal character you can jump around in time and differ which lemming hero you play. That can make the character advancement even more exciting. But don't forget that the rules below assume that you are playing in order with the same lemmings so adjust it rationally to your personal case.

The Lemming Heroes

Every lemming character is a hero among the lemmings. Their special ability makes them heroes which aren't possessed by the other lemmings. (It is possible that there are other lemming heroes that have the same ability, but I strongly advise against it, because it would destroy the character's uniqueness.) In the beginning it is a generic ability that can cover many things and the term "level 1" is assigned to it. (It can be anything, but mostly it has to do with the manipulating of huge masses of lemmings. For example: "to fire up lemmings" or "to organize lemmings" etc.) In an optimal adventure one or more of the lemming heroes' abilities are needed to solve the problem of the adventure. (For example if the lemming population has to climb a high cliff, the organizing of lemmings is needed to gather the needed equipment to climb and firing them up is needed to spill the courage into them or they won't dare to climb.)

On the first level this has to be a generic ability, but it can mobilize most of the lemmings, almost everyone of them. If the GM decides at the end of the adventure that you used your lemming character's ability to solve the problem, he/she can allow you to get another level in that ability. You mustn't erase the level 1 ability you wrote down on your character sheet, because later it will be important. If you get another level in your ability, you have to choose a tighter part of your ability that won't cover all of it, but it's going to give depth to the ability. (For example if you have the 1st level ability "organizing lemmings" then you can choose for level 2 "organizing a constructing company" or "organizing the agriculture of the lemming population".) It has a smaller scope and it mobilizes far less lemmings, but it means more knowledge and more exact result.

If you have 2 or more levels in your ability, you can choose to specialize like before and raising one level up again, or you can choose to widen your knowledge and specialize on a field that you have already acquired. (For example if you began with level 1 "organizing", surpassed level 2 "organizing the agriculture" and reached level 3 "organizing the cultivation" and get another level, you can choose between level 2 "organizing a constructing company" and level 3 "organizing stock-raising" and level 4 "organizing crop rotation". Certainly these are just examples there are many many more possibilities, you only have to ask the GM if your idea is allowed.)

Never forget that these abilities are very special and if the characters use them the results has very big momentum. You can't just stop the organizing of crop rotation, can you? That's why the players have to be wary using these abilities. You can get only one level in one adventure and you can only build another level of ability on the basis of the one used to solve the problem in the adventure. So with time the GM can level the lemming characters abilities if needed.

The Bull-Headed Animals

The hook is you can't play "clean" lemming characters. You have to play through the animal characters. They have feelings and thoughts themselves and most of all they have their animal instincts that is the most repelling to the fire. (The fire must be treated with care and intelligence, you know.) Hence the fire plays upon them a game to repress their instincts.

First of all be sure that all the players pick a different animal to be their animal character. (I mean a different species.) Second, when picking an animal, think about its characteristics that became common knowledge in the fables. You can use for examples the one of Aesop's, but all the players and the GM have to agree what their picking is based on. It is important, because the characteristics and traits of the animal characters will bleed through and show in the behavior of the lemming characters.

While creating your animal character, you have to choose the most important characteristic or trait of your animal character. (For example the bravery for the lion or the waryness of the rabbit.) You don't have to worry about if it is for the good or the bad of your character, because you have to write down the good and the bad side of that characteristic both on your character sheet. (For example brave/daring or wary/coward.)

The characteristics have degrees instead of levels. Your first and foremost is of the 3rd degree. This means that you can use this trait in the lemmings' adventure to the lemming character's benefit. For example if your lion has a 3rd degree bravery, your lemming hero can climb up on the high cliff, before the other lemmings got fired up, to look around and decide the optimal route for the population. But a 3rd degree trait is also an endangered trait. If you have a 3rd degree trait at the beginning of an adventure, you have to pull a card from the deck prepared by the GM. The GM can take out of it some cards, but he/she has to show them the players, because everyone has to know which cards are in play and which aren't. (I would prefer to use a 32 card William Tell pack, but it can be simulated if you take out of the game the cards under 7.)

After the player pulls a card without looking at it, he/she shows it to the GM and if his/her lemming character has no special ability above level three, he/she shows it to all the other players, too, then puts it front of him/her on the table, faces down. While playing the adventure everytime the character uses the trait, the GM gives points in proportion to the degree of the exploiting. At the crucial moment of the game, when the GM decides that the negative side of the trait could do the most destruction in the lemmings' plan, he/she asks the player to turn the card faces up. If the points add up or surpass the value of the card, than the negative side of the trait is triggered and it causes destruction in proportion to the number of exceeding points. (The values of the cards are: J=11, Q=12, K=13, A=14.) If the other players had a look at the card at the beginning, their animal characters can warn the endangered animal character, but telling the player the value of the card would spoil the game.

Before the beginning of the second adventure the players choose a second trait of the 2nd degree to their animal characters. A 2nd degree trait is not that useful to problem solving, but colors their character. If a character has a 2nd degree trait, the GM decides if there is a critical moment in that the character can use it to its benefit. In this case the GM tells the player about the possibility and asks if he/she is willing to go with it. If the player lends him/herself to it, the trait raises to 3rd degree and for the remainder of that adventure the trait can be used for good without any penalty.

Before the beginning of the third adventure the players choose a third trait of the 1st degree to their animal characters. A 1st degree trait is latent and has no effect at all on its first adventure. If the player colors the character's behavior in the aftermath with this trait, then it raises to the 2nd degree for the next adventure. It is really a decision of the player.

An important rule: in one adventure you can raise the degree of only a single trait.

Examples for animals
(1st at 3rd degree, 2nd at 2nd degree, 3rd at 1st degree)

Lion: brave/foolhardy, strong/violent, protective/paranoid.

Rabbit: cautious/coward, quick/hasty, cunning/insidious.

Examples for adventures

The lemmings have to cross a deep canyon. They have to climb down all the way down, swim through the river and then climb up, or to somehow make a bridge. It is going to be tricky, because in the desert there are not much tree to fell.

The lemmings come across a town of humans while starving because of the food shortage. The heroes have to come up with something: they go around or try to find some food in the town wich garbage is pillaged by likewise hungry foxes. There are many possibilities: one of them is to ally with the foxes, another is to battle them or there is the possibility to search the town at daylight, but that time the humans are awake.

If you liked this game, check out my previous 24 hour RPG
["Mighty Ones: A Fantasy RPG about the Players Themselves"](#).