

The Visitor

In a nutshell: “Alf” meets “Sign in Stranger” when an eight-foot-tall incomprehensible alien starfish comes to live with a normal human family to try and understand our species. A game for 3-5 players with no GM. You will need a 6- and a 12-sided die.

Background: We are not alone in the universe. One year ago, astronomers at the New Mexico Very Large Array detected an unusual celestial body entering our solar system. Six months ago, humanity made first contact with an alien race. Although they are not related to any life as we know it, their appearance, combined with the human instinct to understand the world via analogy, has earned them the nickname “starfish.” Starfish technology is far beyond ours. At the very least, they have solved the problem of faster-than-light travel, and there are some indications that this may be only the tip of the iceberg. This is a source of great concern to the American government, who are keeping knowledge of the starfish hidden from the general population while they desperately attempt to negotiate with the aliens and try to figure out what to do.

The Starfish, for their part, seem friendly enough, but as a precursor to diplomatic relations, they have made a non-negotiable demand: that they be allowed to send an emissary to live with a “normal” human family to observe it. The United States government feels it has no choice but to agree. Having selected a suitable family, federal agents explained the gravity of the situation, and swore them to secrecy. Although the visitor will be certain to attract attention, the cover story will be that this is all part of a reality TV show with hidden cameras. No explanation will be provided for the visitor, but the government trusts that people will come up with their own explanations for how it’s a fake. The visitor is to be given full access to the lives of its hosts, both personal and professional.

The “starfish” are a radially-symmetric carbon-based species with 5-12 appendages radiating out from a central body. One side of their body and arms is covered in chitinous plating, with colors and patterns varying by individuals. Scientists are unsure about the purpose of this coloring - hypotheses include social rank, kinship groups, personal preference, and life stage. The chitinous side also includes 3-8 featureless black eyes the size of marbles embedded seemingly at random in the central body. The other side of the limbs and body is covered with short (3-5”) manipulator tendrils which can pass objects down the arms to a central orifice located on the body. When amongst humans, the starfish walk “upright” - using two appendages as “legs,” one furled vertically as a “head,” and the remainder as “arms.” The starfish do not wear clothes and are hermaphroditic. They can breathe normally in Earth’s atmosphere, a fact that has raised some suspicion among scientists about the starfishes’ purpose in travelling to our solar system. The starfish do not have the vocal apparatus to speak human languages, but the visitor has brought a small machine that will enable it to haltingly produce a small number of words.

Setup: One player must choose to play the Visitor. All other players will be family members (“FMs”). The “family” players will jointly decide on a concept for their family. Rich or poor? Urban or rural? A classic nuclear family, or a single dad raising a daughter? Why were they chosen to host the Visitor, and why did they agree? Each non-Visitor player should now create their FM. FMs need a name, a role in the family, a nutshell summary (e.g. “punk rock kid,” “soccer mom,” “absent-minded professor”), and an issue that the character struggles with - “I need to be in control,” “I don’t fit in anywhere,” “I can’t be with the person I love,” whatever.

Each of the following classes of NPCs must now be given to a player. Some of these roles are more substantive than others, so keep that in mind when doubling up. You will roleplay all NPCs that fall into the classes you have custody of, except during scenes where your character is highlighted, when you will assign control over those NPCs to other players. You also have leeway to make up facts and details about NPCs in your classes, and questions about their personality, habits, etc, should be directed to you.

Authority figures - Includes bosses, government agents, teachers, etc.

Peers - Coworkers, fellow students, the cute barista at the coffee shop, etc.

Underlings - The maintenance guy, the interns, etc.

Kooks - Although most people see what they want to see when they look at the Visitor (a guy in a costume, animatronics, whatever), some people want to see things that are pretty weird. UFO nuts, religious fanatics, anti-genetic-engineering activists who think the Visitor came from a lab, “kooks” covers all the whackjobs who will inevitably come to gawk at or harass the Visitor and its family.

Aliens - This is pretty self-explanatory. The Visitor’s player may *not* have custody of aliens. Any facts about aliens or alien society not set down in this document are to be determined by the player with custody of aliens.

The Visitor player now rolls a die on the following table to determine the nature of starfish culture.

1 - Space communist. The starfish are a communal society that places little value on individuals or individual freedom, instead working together in a vast bureaucracy. If the Visitor is from a space communist culture, it will tend to assume that personal desire and individualism are the source of problems, while following rules and putting the group’s interests ahead of one’s own are always helpful.

2 - Space capitalist. Everything can be bought or sold amongst the starfish, and constant, ruthless, economic competition has made their society affluent and efficient. A space capitalist Visitor will tend to assume that all human interactions are (ideally mutually beneficial) transactions between rational actors.

3 - Religious/philosophical zealot. The starfish have metaphysical beliefs about morality and the nature of the universe which they consider to be self-evident, and hold more dear than life itself. A zealous Visitor will tend to look for the human “version” of its beliefs, assume problems result from a lack of its beliefs, and attempt to enlighten nearby humans through words or actions.

4 - Hive. The starfish are biologically a collective, and though they are distinct individuals they have no concept of privacy or self-interest. They have low-level intraspecies telepathy, so they

never need to guess what that other starfish are feeling. A hive Visitor will assume that humans understand each other as deeply and instinctively as starfish, and will either be confused by petty cruelty and interpersonal problems, or will assume that they hold some sensible deeper purpose.

5 - Darwinian. The struggle for limited resources is the only constant in starfish history, and they are masters of combat and warfare at both individual and group levels. They respect strength and have little concept of justice independent of power. They will tend to assume that individuals or institutions with social or political power have proportionate physical power (and vice versa), and solve problems either physically, or by helping a human "toughen up"

6 - invent your own **or** roll twice more and combine.

The Visitor can understand spoken English reasonably well, but it cannot write, and its vocal apparatus can only produce a small number of words. At the beginning of the game, that number is five. The Visitor's player may choose some or all of these words now, or may choose them as they come up in the game. Once chosen, these words may not be changed. At the end of each scene it participates in, the Visitor may learn an additional word (i.e. increase it's maximum number of words known).

The Visitor also has a list of topics about human society to investigate. They are as follows:

- 1 - Labor and the economy
- 2 - Medicine
- 3 - Reproduction and development
- 4 - Eating and excrement
- 5 - Entertainment and Art
- 6 - Science and engineering
- 7 - Education
- 8 - Military
- 9 - Religion
- 10 - Politics and law
- 11 - Cultural norms and practices
- 12 - Earth and its animal and plant inhabitants

The player who has "aliens" should cross out one of these topics that has no meaning or relevance to the starfish (depending on what was rolled for the nature of their culture), and replace it with "ileth nnah," an important element of starfish society that has no equivalent on Earth.

Play: The first scene is family dinner. The FMs and the Visitor are all present. The Visitor has been with the family for a few days - enough so that they are not continually focused on the Visitor, but not so many that the Visitor has a good understanding of the humans and their problems. At some point during the dinner conversation, each FM describes or complains about trouble that they are having in their life - this should be a more specific instance of the FM's issue. Once each FM has shared their problem, the Visitor points to one FM. That FM and his or her problems will be the focus of the session.

Scenes may take place in any order, as long as each player gets a chance to start a scene before any player starts a second scene (and so on). When you are starting a scene, describe where it is taking place, who is present, and what is going on. You will play your FM (the Visitor's scenes are a little different and are described below). NPCs will be played by whoever has custody of the appropriate class. If it's your scene, you pick who plays the NPCs of the class(es) you have custody over. End the scene whenever it feels appropriate. If you're the session's focus FM, your scenes should focus on your problem. If another FM is the focus, your scenes should relate to the focus FM or his or her problem, or they should involve thematic parallels to the FM's problem.

The Visitor's scenes are where the Visitor reports back to its superior(s) about its time with the humans. Each Visitor scene begins with the Visitor getting into contact with its superior, either physically or remotely. The alien player, playing the other starfish, inquires what the Visitor has accomplished since its last report. The Visitor must give one of the following responses:

- I helped a someone with a problem
- I learned something about life on this planet
- I satisfied one of my biological needs

The Visitor and the other alien then review a recording of the event. The Visitor frames a scene with one or more FMs. The other players portray their FMs and NPCs and the scene is roleplayed as normal, except that the Visitor makes frequent asides to the other alien, explaining its interpretation of the events. The Visitor should feel free to introduce NPCs and situations unrelated to the focal FM's problem, like maverick FBI agents, UFO nuts, a carnival, cattle mutilation, etc (anyone can do this, but the Visitor's scenes are a particularly good opportunity). The other alien should give advice, criticism, orders, etc.

During any scene, yours or someone else's, you may use one of five phrases to alter play:

- "Try that a different way," used when you don't think someone's narration fits the story.
- "Describe that in detail," used when something interesting is being glossed over and you want more depth.
- "How about a follow-up scene?" is used when you'd like to see a bit of story continue right away. The player you use the phrase on may choose to take an additional scene right away, but then must skip their next turn.
- "I'd like an interlude" is used when you'd like to add a brief epilogue to a scene.
- "That might not be so easy" is used when there's a challenge or a conflict, and this can only be used once per turn. When you use it, the person whose character is in the conflict chooses

another player to roll on the resolution table and interpret the result

Resolution table (basic)

1-2 Yes, but... The character succeeds, but something completely unrelated goes wrong, for the character or someone she cares about.

3 Yes, but only if... The character can get what she wants - but only if she chooses to make a certain sacrifice.

4 Help is needed. The character ends up understanding that she needs the help of someone not currently in the scene to achieve this aim.

5 No, but... The character fails, but another positive thing happens instead, unrelated to what she was aiming for.

6 No, and... The character fails, and something unrelated also goes wrong.

Interspecies relations, especially between two species as different as the Visitor and humans, are bound to be plagued by misunderstandings. When the Visitor encounters a novel element of human society, it may attempt to understand it. To do so, the Visitor simply rolls 1D12 on the list of topics about human society to investigate. The Visitor believes the thing it is investigating falls under the heading of the topic rolled. Write this down for future reference. The Visitor may have any number of such misunderstandings.

Example: the family brings the Visitor to a movie theater. The Visitor attempts to understand the movies and rolls 1D12. The Visitor rolls a 3, reproduction and development. Seeing the teenage couples necking in the theater, the Visitor deduces that "the movies" are part of human mating rituals.

The Visitor may "charge up" one of its misunderstandings by acting on it. If the Visitor acts on a misunderstanding and causes trouble for someone before or during a conflict (including causing trouble for itself!), put a "/" by the misunderstanding to indicate that it is charged. To resolve a conflict complicated by misunderstanding, use the following table instead of the basic one:

Resolution table (misunderstanding)

1 Help is needed. The character ends up understanding that she needs the help of someone not currently in the scene to achieve this aim.

2-4 No, but... The character fails, but another positive thing happens instead, unrelated to what she was aiming for.

5-6 No, and... The character fails, and something unrelated also goes wrong.

Once a misunderstanding is charged by causing a conflict to go badly, it may be discharged to cause a conflict to go well. To discharge a misunderstanding, the Visitor must either act on its misunderstanding in a way that is inadvertently helpful, or correct its misunderstanding and act intentionally helpful. Put a second slash through the "/" by the misunderstanding, turning it into an "X". To resolve a conflict assisted by the Visitor in this fashion, use the following table instead of the basic one:

Resolution table (discharge)

1-2 Yes, but... The character succeeds, but something completely unrelated goes wrong, for the character or someone she cares about.

3-4 Yes, but only if... The character can get what she wants - but only if she chooses to make a certain sacrifice.

5-6 Yes, and... The character succeeds and achieves much more than she expected. Perhaps even a bit too much...

Once a misunderstanding has been discharged, the Visitor can learn the truth underlying it (although that doesn't have to happen right away).

After at least one misunderstanding has been discharged, the focal FM's problem can be resolved. The focal FM's problem *cannot* be resolved prior to this. Once the focal FM's problem has been resolved, the session should end naturally.

Continuing Play: If you wish to play additional sessions, each FM should get a turn as the focus. Once each FM has been the focal character for a session, the next session will begin with the Visitor's superiors explaining to it their plan for Earth. The nature of this plan, and whether it is benevolent or malevolent, will be dependant on the starfish culture, and upon the intelligence the Visitor has given them. The superiors will give the Visitor a mission to carry out that will enable them to realize their plan for Earth. At this point, the Visitor must choose whether to carry out the mission or whether to oppose the alien plan; it must also choose whether to inform and enlist the family, or whether to conduct its mission in secret. If the Visitor supports the plan and the family opposes it, they will provide opposition for each other. If the Visitor and the family support the plan, a paranoid and belligerent government agency will oppose them. If the Visitor and the family oppose the plan, then they will be up against naive or co-opted government forces, along with their alien puppet-masters. Best of luck!

Ludography: The resolution system is pretty obviously adapted/taken from Archipelago, as are the key phrases; the custody of classes of NPCs is based on the distribution of elements in that game. Character issues and the spotlight characters are from PTA. Incomprehensible aliens and randomly-generated category confusion are from Sign in Stranger.