



Rat Race

Justifying job performance to our curious alien overlord.

A roleplaying game for 4 players

Earth has been conquered by a bizarre alien creature. It is completely unfamiliar and unfathomable to human senses and concepts. It views us as an extremely cool toy, and it's fascinated by all the objects and arts that humanity produces.

You have been hired as a liaison to help the alien in its performance review of human occupations. The alien wants you to help it understand all the nuances of workplace behavior so it can know how best to modify policy. It is looking to experiment, to see if it can help its new toy -- us -- to produce as much unique stuff as possible.

The alien trusts you, but only to a degree. If you are too consistently supportive of the humans under review, your own review is less likely to go favorably.

Play materials:

- 10 tokens (anything will do)
- 1 sheet of paper
- a pen or pencil
- these instructions, plus the 3 decks of cards (Job, Schema, and Fate)

There are four roles in this game: the Liaison, the Alien, the Worker, and the Audience.

The Liaison

One player plays the Liaison for the entire game. The Liaison's job in play is to speak to the Alien, defending human behavior in a way that makes sense to the demonstrated alien sensibility. The Liaison starts with a Security rating of 3, and 7 tokens. During each step (vignette) of each performance review, the Liaison may spend a token to signify their effective defense of the worker. (There are 3 steps in each review of 3 different Workers, so 9 total. You only have 7 tokens, so spend them on the worker(s) you want to support most!) The more tokens the Liaison spends, the lower their final Security rating at the end of the game. (see End of the Game)

The Alien

The other three players take turns playing the Alien. The Alien is extremely strange but you don't need to understand it entirely in order to play it effectively. For each workplace event you witness, you will draw a card giving you a Schema through which to interpret that event. You should initially judge each event somewhat critically, but remain open to the Liaison's feedback. At the end of each worker's review, you will form a Suggestion

for how that workplace should be changed. These Suggestions will factor in to the final decisions made by the inscrutable alien uber-brain at the end of the game.

The Worker

When it's your turn to be the Worker, you must pick a job that you have actually held in real life¹. You will then draw a card from the Job pile, and use it as inspiration to narrate a very short "vignette" scene describing one thing you do (or did) in real life at work. These events should be relatable, commonplace human activities (don't fear the mundane). After each vignette, you must wait until the Alien and Liaison are finished interpreting your action before drawing another Job prompt and beginning another vignette. After 3 vignettes, you are done with your turn as the Worker.

The Audience

For each Worker reviewed, the Audience has 1 Token to give to either the Worker or the Alien. You should use this token not as a strategic element, but rather to reward a specific moment of Alien interpretation or Liaison defense that makes you laugh.

The players who are not the Liaison take turns cycling through the other 3 roles.

Starting play

Cut out the 3 types of cards, shuffle each pile randomly and place them face down on the table, labeling which pile is which.

Pick starting roles and begin the first turn!

What happens in a turn

Roles play as described previously. The action order is:

- 1** The Worker draws a Job prompt and narrates a short vignette.
- 2** The Alien draws* a Schema and interprets the Worker's action.
- 3** The Liaison decides whether or not to spend a Token and roleplays accordingly.
- 4** Repeat steps 1-3 two more times.

Liaison:

Note that failing to spend a Token can be characterized in a number of ways: attacking the Worker, being indifferent, or simply doing a bad job of defending them. However, if you do choose to spend a Token, do your best to appeal to the Alien perspective that was just played. (The Alien player need not actually be convinced. Some other part of the uber-brain may be what is swayed.)

The Audience may opt to play their Token at any point during steps 2 or 3, or not at all if they wish.

End of the turn

After their 3 vignettes, the Worker will have been given anywhere from 0 to 4 Tokens. Any Tokens awarded by the Audience for Liaison defense go to the Worker being defended.

The Liaison's pool of Tokens doesn't replenish.

The Alien player secretly writes a Suggestion for how this Worker's work experience should be changed. This Suggestion may be specific to the Worker, may cover their whole company, or may impact the entire relevant industry.

Put the suggestion face-down on the table, write the Worker's name on the back, and set that aside, along with that Worker's Tokens, until the End of the Game.

*Optional rule:

Instead of the Alien player randomly picking a Schema, the Audience player chooses a Schema from the deck, or makes one up, based on what they'd most like to see at that moment.

End of the Game

Once all three Workers have been observed, interpreted, and defended, the turns are done. It's now time for the executive portion of the alien brain to decide what to do. It factors in the local sub-brains' suggestions, the strength of the Liaison's defenses, and a higher logic unfathomed by man.

Final Security Ratings

For each Worker:

The number of tokens in that Worker's pile is their Security rating.

For the Liaison:

If you have 0-1 Tokens remaining, your Security rating is 1.

If you have 2-4 Tokens remaining, your Security rating is 2.

If you have 5-7 Tokens remaining, your Security rating is 3.

The more guarded you have been in the defense of the Workers, the more trusted you are and the more Secure your job.

Discovering and Dodging Fates

The Liaison's player randomly draws a card from the Fate deck to assign to each worker and then themselves. Each card has a rating on it: 3, 2, or 1. This rating is compared to the human's Security rating. If the card's number is higher, that human meets the fate displayed on the card. If the two numbers are tied, the human achieves Mild Benefit. If the security ratings is higher, the human achieves Maximum Benefit.

Interpreting Fates

For each Worker, the player who played the Alien judging that Worker takes the Suggestion that they wrote and combines that with the Fate (from the card or Mild or Maximum Benefit -- see below) to inspire their narration.

All 3 other players narrate the final fate of the Liaison.

Mild Benefit. The status quo appears to be optimal, so here's a token of appreciation.

Maximum Benefit. Worker must be given vast wealth, status, comforts, or property.

Fate Cards

1 Moderate disorientation

Worker is made to do, wear, or perceive something off-putting.

Fate applies to that Worker, plus optionally their employer, plus optionally their industry.

2 Maximum life upheaval (no injury)

Worker must live in conditions that are either distracting, painful, disgusting, or embarrassing.

Fate applies to that Worker, plus optionally their employer, plus optionally their industry.

2 Maximum work upheaval (no injury)

Worker must work in conditions that are either distracting, painful, disgusting, or embarrassing.

Fate applies to that Worker, plus optionally their employer, plus optionally their industry.

3 Maximum destruction and death

Worker must be either killed, enslaved, or extremely transformed in an unpleasant way.

Fate applies to that Worker, plus optionally their employer, plus optionally their industry.

Job Prompts

Working as fast as possible

What leads you to do this? When you do this, how good a job do you do?

Working as slowly as possible

What leads you to do this? Are you doing anything else at the time?

Socializing

While working, at the water cooler, on the phone. Who, when, where, about what?

Hiding not working

When getting away with it takes some effort, what do you do?

Entertaining yourself

Headphones, computer games, doodling. What do you do?

Breaking a rule

Or basic law. Do you kiss co-workers? Steal? Something besides mere slacking.

Instructing inferiors

How do you explain or assign tasks to subordinates?

Reporting to superiors

How do you interact with the person who can fire you?

Bathroom

How far away is it? How long do you spend in there? Do you wash your hands?

Food

Snacks, breaks, lunch time. When, where, and what do you eat?

Schema Cards

Two options.

First is the alien's native frame of reference.

Second is categories the alien has learned to classify human behavior.

The Alien player can use either one, or both in conjunction.

one species, one mind

job training (parenting, school)

imperfect efficiency means a process is broken

evolution (radiation -> mutation -> natural selection)

a lifespan is thousands of years

manufacture (making stuff)

all novelty is good

waste removal (exhale, pee, crap, shed skin & hair)

all behavior is intentional and well-thought-out

conception (new ideas for objects or endeavors)

emotion is purely a reaction to novelty and efficiency

protection (violence, clothes, homes, immune system)

specialization is biologically determined

information relay (sending signals across humanity)

the purpose of conflict is evolution

sustenance (air, food, water)

humanity's purpose is to produce new kinds of stuff

propagation (grow humanity via babies)

the amount of time a process takes is irrelevant

temperature (bodies & environments)

Designer's Notes:

The situation is loaded with ethical dilemma for the Liaison. How much do you betray your own kind to an Other to win favor? How much do you risk yourself to protect your fellow man? How do you choose which Workers will face the greatest risk of death or torment? How do you conduct yourself throughout?

Each Worker player must also face questions about the value of their role at work.

At the same time, play consists largely of alien views and misinterpretation of familiar human activity. Fantastical re-framing is a key source of humor in *The Far Side*, *Toy Story*, and countless other comedic media. Misinterpretation is at the heart of situation comedies like *Seinfeld*.

Depending on how the Liaison and Alien choose to play their roles, they may not have space to step back and enjoy the humor in what they're saying, but that's what the Audience is for. Comedy is more fun for the whole group when someone's laughing, and the Worker can join the Audience in mirth between vignettes.

The current play structure doesn't develop the characters enough for players to form strong attachments and invest in their fates. I assume the moment-to-moment entertainment will win out over any deeper concerns. In the future, a more invested version of the game, with fleshed-out characters, would be interesting to try.

Final note: this could be 5-player with 2 Audience per turn.

