

## The Starfish Ambassador A Little Game Chef Game (Starfish, Recall, Holiday)

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*It is 3:AM on New Year's Day in Washington DC, and the news has just broken of a major diplomatic row between Canada and the Popular Unified Federal Republic of Starf. The scandal is so serious that Starf has canceled its plans to build a new Flux Grommet Factory in Ontario, and is looking for a new location for its North American plant. Due to the holiday, only a handful of Senators remain in town, and they rush to the Starfish consulate. Also due to the holiday, none of the official US government translators trained in Starfish are available, but that can't be a huge problem. After all, everybody knows that Starfish is almost exactly like English, with only a few, subtle changes. What could possibly go wrong?*

The Starfish Ambassador is a comic roleplaying game for 3 or more people. One player will take the role of the assistant to the Starfish Ambassador, which is a game-facilitating role similar to that of a gamemaster in traditional RPGs. The remaining players will each take the roles of Senators from different states in the US, each of whom wants to land the factory and all of the jobs that come with it in their home state. In addition to the players, this game requires a stopwatch, a number of counters equal to the number of Senator players, one pen, and several pieces of paper or notecards.

### **Playing as a Senator**

As a seasoned politician, you can convince anyone of anything so long as you can talk to them enough. Your goal is to score enough points with the Ambassador, and then make a final pitch to get the factory. Your main tool for scoring points is by making Filibusters, two minute speeches in favor of your state or answering the Ambassador's questions. If you make it all the way through the two minutes without accidentally insulting or boring the Ambassador, you score two points. If you make it half-way through, you still score one point. You can also score a point if you catch another Senator insulting the Ambassador before the Assistant does, but if you're wrong and there was no insult, you lose a point and they may continue their filibuster. You've brought one Bribe Counter's worth of the Petty Cash along with you, and you can give this to the Ambassador's Assistant after somebody has insulted the Ambassador to get him to let you (and only you) know exactly what it was that caused the insult. You and the other Senators have a 'gentleman's agreement' not to get into a bidding war, so once you've spent the Bribe Counter you can't send a page to get more cash immediately after spending it. When all of the Senators have spent their bribe counters, each one gets a new one. You and the other Senators will take turns talking to the Ambassador, going clockwise around the table.

When you start your turn with 10 points, you must make your final pitch, which is like a normal Filibuster except that you win the game if you complete it and you lose two points if you insult or bore the Ambassador.

As a Senator, you may not take notes of any kind during play, and must rely entirely on your memory to recall the various rules that make Starfish different from English. You are encouraged, but not required, to adopt an accent appropriate to your State when possible.

### **Playing as the Ambassador's Assistant**

The Starfish Ambassador is a deeply sensitive soul who never actually speaks during the game, and understands only Starfish. Designate some inanimate object in the room as the Ambassador for the other players to speak to. Your role in the game is twofold: firstly, you must establish the rules of the Starfish language (apart from rule #0: It is pronounced "Starf-ish", and never "Star-fish", which is a constant in every game.) At the beginning of the game, write four different rules on separate sheets of paper. The rules should govern ways of speaking, such as "Always roll your 'r's", "Do not ever use the word 'is'", "All abstract concepts must take male pronouns", and so forth. A long list of possible rules is provided on the other side of these rules, but you are encouraged to make up your own. Whenever any player successfully completes a full two-minute Filibuster, add another rule. You need not be consistent with previous dialog in making new rules; it is always possible that the Starfish language changes slightly based on the time of the day or other changing conditions. Your goal with rules should be to make it difficult to obey them all, but not impossible. Additionally, whenever you are speaking to the Senators, you are speaking in English, so you need not obey the rules you establish yourself.

Secondly, it is your responsibility to enforce the rules, particularly the ones that the other players don't yet know. Whenever you hear anything that violates a rule, shout "How dare you insult the Ambassador", which ends that player's turn. When a player gives you a bribe counter, show that card with that rule to that player only. If multiple players want to give bribes on a single turn, accept only the one whose next turn is soonest. Once other players know a rule, give them time to challenge each other on it, but you should still object yourself if nobody seems to notice.

Finally, you should intervene if a Filibuster has become repetitive, boring, unrelated to the matter at hand or if they are speaking deliberately slowly in order to run down the clock. You may, in mild cases of this, interrupt the Filibuster with a question, which the Senator should answer rather than continuing their planned speech, or you may end the player's turn by giving a huge Yawn. You may also want to ask questions at the beginning of a player's turn, directing the Filibuster to a specific topic.

As the Ambassador's Assistant, you may consult your written rules at any time. You should not speak with any recognizable accent.

If it becomes clear to you that Starfish has become too difficult for any of the players to speak and there is no real hope of any player winning, you may end the game by announcing that the factory will be built in Canada after all.

### Possible Rules of Starfish

This list is meant as a guide and inspiration. Feel free to use rules directly from this list, or to modify them as you need. Try to pick rules from different groups when possible, and be careful of rules that require players to recite long fixed pieces of text, since those will help them take up time rather than making that harder.

#### Rule Zero

This rule is present in all games and does not count against the four starting rules.

- "Starfish" is pronounced 'starf-ish', and never 'starfish'. The people of that nation are 'starfs', and never 'starves'.

#### Letter-based Rules

1. The letter 'm' is silent
2. 'v's should be pronounced as 'w's, and vice versa
3. 's' sounds should be snakelike hisses
4. Silent consonants should be pronounced
5. Add 'f' to the beginning of words starting with vowels
6. Add '-e' to the end of all nouns that end in consonants

#### Grammar Rules

1. Use "b" instead of "s" for plural nouns and verbs
2. Add "eth" to the end of all present-tense verbs
3. Use only progressive tenses ("am going", "was going", "will be going", "had been going", etc.)
4. Omit all articles ('a', 'an', or 'the')
5. Pronounce all punctuation out loud.
6. Use no contractions.

#### Word-based Rules

1. Use the word 'shave' instead of 'have'.
2. Whenever you use an adjective, double it. ("Red" becomes "Red red")
3. Never use the word "I"
4. Use "Ze" and "Zer" as a gender-neutral pronoun instead of 'He', 'She', 'His', or 'Her'.
5. Use "me" instead of "I" or "my"
6. Use "betamax" instead of "plant" (Note: try to use words common and central to the conversation for this type of rule.)

#### Word-Group Rules

1. Precede any concrete noun with "techno-"
2. Don't use any adjectives with fewer than three syllables
3. Whenever you use a number, add three.
4. Spell out any proper name the first time you use it.
5. All inanimate objects take female pronouns
6. Add "own" after any possessive form. ("my house" becomes "my own house")

### Physical Rules

1. Whenever you mention a person, point in that person's direction.
2. Stand up after you ask a question.
3. Put your hand on your heart whenever Starf is mentioned.
4. Close your eyes while speaking, and open them when spoken to.
5. Mine a toast whenever you name your state.
6. Knock on wood whenever you use the word "if".

### Sentence-Based Rules

1. End every sentence with 'Your Excellency'
2. Use only compound sentence
3. Use a four-syllable word in each sentence.
4. Order sentences object-noun-verb (talk like Yoda)
5. Never repeat any noun, verb, or adjective in a single sentence.
6. Whenever a sentence begins with a verb, double it and insert "I say" between the copies. ("Bring" becomes "Bring, I say, Bring")

### Semantic Rules

1. Never use rhetorical questions
2. Mention a part of nature at least every other sentence
3. Always answer a question with a question.
4. Never use a list of items with fewer than three members,
5. Use no metaphors
6. Use at least three similes in a Filibuster (Note: use rules that cause a failure only at the very end of a filibuster attempt sparingly, and introduce them early in the game.)

### Advanced Rules

The following rules are extremely difficult, and should be used with caution and usually only near the end of a game.

1. Always say the opposite of what they mean, bizarro-style
2. Mention either an animal, a color, or a sport in every sentence.
3. Speak only in rhyming couplets
4. Speak only in iambic pentameter
5. Never use any form of the verb 'to be'
6. Speak every third word in pig Latin.

### Scoring Summary

- Successful 2-minute Filibuster: 2 points
- Filibuster ended after >1 minute: 1 point
- Filibuster ended after <1 minute: 0 points
- Successful Challenge of other player insult: 1 point
- Failed Challenge of other player insult: -1 point
- Final Pitch ended before completion: -2 points.

## Designer's Notes:

The idea for this game came directly out of a look at the ingredients. In particular, I was building a little 'meaning-matrix' for the ingredients to see the sorts of ideas that might inspire: for "Bond", I had "James, Savings, Connection, Covalent, Promise". When I got to "Starfish", I thought that I was stuck, after "the kind you find on a beach" and "giant fish that swim out in space", until "the language that starfs speak" popped into my head. I immediately had the idea of a game about language, since language-based comedy is my favorite kind of comedy anyhow, and quickly decided to put "Starfish" together with "Holiday" (to explain why the professional translators aren't available) and "Recall" (gameplay involves memorization of a growing list of rules) to put together what I hope is a neat little game in the tradition of Calvinball, Nomic, and most especially Mao.

The mechanics changed very little from idea to final concept, with the only idea that went by the wayside being a running tally of how many times the Ambassador has been insulted that would automatically end the game. I decided against that because it would sometimes give players an incentive to not challenge another player's insult, which was a type of metagaming I wanted to avoid. There's another similar metagaming tactic that's still in the game, which is deliberately insulting the Ambassador after one minute of a Filibuster to score a point while avoiding having a new rule created. Doing this is contrary to the spirit of the game, and the Assistant should feel free to deny both points if fairly certain this has happened, but I didn't want to include this as a rule in the main text of the game for space reasons (I still like the "Harper Award" restrictions for LGC) and because the main text shouldn't, in my opinion, assume that kind of bad faith as even a possibility.

It has not escaped me that this game would be trivial to turn into a drinking game, and in fact can turn into a drinking game during play. Anyone who does so should, of course, be certain all players freely consent to this and exercise all due caution and responsibility.