louse

a game by hosni auji, corey bertelsen, andrew petersell and vivi yu

"A cooperative, role-playing, community manager simulation card game in which you and your friends must work together to fix the Internet."



Overview

After slaving away for months, spending what felt like hundreds of sleepless nights coding, designing, and tweaking shaders, you and your team have done it; you finally created a video game that you're all proud of. Now with only one week until launch day, you and your team must create a strong, social media presence in order to gather a dedicated fanbase and generate hype for your game. However, the Internet is a dangerous place. You never know when an innocent game community can turn into a toxic cesspool of the worst kind of people, and ruin your game's reputation.

Rules of the Game

~ Object of the Game ~

You and your team must ensure the success of your game's launch by managing your online community. You must maintain a fanbase of dedicated followers while keeping the trolls at bay and mitigating the general toxicity of your community. Your target is to keep 20 or more Followers by the end of Day 7 without reaching the Toxicity Level 6.

~ Materials ~

- 4 Players
- 4 louse decks (containing 9 cards each)
    - 1 Celebrity louse deck
    - 1 Socialite louse deck
    - 1 Moderator louse deck
    - 1 Troll Bait louse deck
- 4 Reaction Decks (containing 10 cards each)
    - 1 Celebrity Reaction Deck
        - 2 Re-louse Cards
        - 1 Delete Card
        - 3 Troll Challenge Cards
        - 4 Comment Cards

    - 1 Socialite Reaction Deck
        - 4 Re-louse Cards
        - 2 Delete Cards
        - 1 Troll Challenge Card
        - 3 Comment Cards
    - 1 Moderator Reaction Deck
        - 2 Re-louse Cards
        - 4 Delete Cards
        - 3 Troll Challenge Cards
        - 1 Comment Card
    - 1 Troll Bait Reaction Deck
        - 3 Re-louse Cards
        - 1 Delete Card
        - 4 Troll Challenge Cards
        - 2 Comment Cards
- 1 Common Deck (containing 103 cards)
    - 28 Comment Cards
    - 12 @ Cards
        - 3 @ Celebrity Cards
        - 3 @ Socialite Cards
        - 3 @ Moderator Cards
        - 3 @ Troll Bait Cards
        - 3 Follower Cards
    - 30 Troll Cards
    - 30 Follower Cards
- 4 Dedicated Troll Decks
    - 1 Deck of Troll x 1 Cards
    - 1 Deck of Troll x 2 Cards
    - 1 Deck Troll x 3 Cards
    - 1 Deck Troll x 4 Cards
- 4 Personal Follower Trackers
- 1 Communal Follower Tracker
- 1 Toxicity Tracker
- 1 Day Tracker

~ Setting Up ~

1. First, your team must decide the name of your game and what it's about. Spend some time discussing what your game should be! When you've all decided upon an idea as a group, move to the next step.
2. Each player chooses which role he or she would like to play. Each player may choose only one role, and will remain in that role throughout the game. The roles are as follows:
    a. **The Celebrity**: The Celebrity is a seasoned and successful designer who has already made a name for themselves with their previous work. Without the Celebrity's star power backing it up, no one would have known that your game existed, and you certainly wouldn't have reached your crowdfunding goals. The Celebrity is generous, and enjoys using their considerable notoriety to give their teammates a boost of attention on social media. When the Celebrity **Comments** on a post, it is likely to go viral and attract a lot of attention.
    b. **The Socialite**: As their name might suggest, the Socialite enjoys the social aspect of louse much more than they do the marketing. They want to use their games to bring people together, and they enjoy working with the other members of the team. The Socialite enjoys sharing on louse, and tends to **Re-louse** the posts of the others just as much as they post themself.
    c. **The Moderator**: The Moderator is hard, but they are fair. As the most Internet -savvy member of the team, it fell to the Moderator to become the de-facto Community Manager. The Moderator was the one to originally established the game's social media presence, and personally started the game's community on louse. As such, it's the Moderator's job to keep trolling at a minimum, mostly by judiciously **Deleting** posts, even when it might lose them followers.
    d. **The Troll Bait**: A young creative, the Troll Bait is eager to release their first game to the world, and enjoys hyping it up on social media. However, they have a tendency to be a little hot-headed. The Troll Bait doesn't respond well to toxicity and will be the first to lash out against the Internet pond scum that skulks around the underbelly of message boards. As such, the Troll Bait gets into a lot of **Troll Challenges**. When they win, they reclaim an inch of Internet decency, but when they lose, they lose a mile.
3. Once you have chosen your role, take and shuffle the louse Deck and Reaction Deck associated with your role. Once thoroughly shuffled, place both decks on the table face down in front of you.
4. Take 1 Personal Follower Tracker and set it to 0.

    a. If you are the Celebrity, it will be your responsibility to keep track of the group's Communal Followers. Take the Communal Follower Tracker and set it to 0.
    b. If you are the Moderator, it will be your responsibility to keep track of trolls as well as the general toxicity level of your louse page. Take the Toxicity Tracker and set both the Troll Meter and the Toxicity Meter to 0.
    c. If you are the Troll Bait, it will be your responsibility to keep track of the number of days that have gone by. Take the Day Tracker and set it to 1.
5. Shuffle the Common Deck and place it face down on the table in a location where every player can easily reach it.
6. Place the 4 Dedicated Troll Decks face up on the table in a location where every player can easily reach them.
7. The person on your team who made a post on social media most recently will take the first turn. Turn order proceeds clockwise from the starting player.
    a. Alternatively, simply decide amongst your team who among you will take the first turn.

~ Playing the Game ~

Beginning of a Day

The game is played in a series of rounds referred to as **Days**. The game begins at the beginning of the first day. At the beginning of each new day, follow these two steps:

1) Draw 2 cards from your **Reaction** Deck forming your hand. Cards in your hand are not secret and can be shown to other players.
2) At the beginning of every day except the first day, if you are the Troll Bait, move the Day Tracker up by 1.

Playing Your Turn

On each day, each player will take 1 **Turn**. On your turn you may either post a **louse** or play an **Reaction Card** from your hand. Note that you can perform both of these actions during your turn if you choose, but you may not perform neither. You **must** perform at least one of these actions during each of your turns.

Posting a louse

Posting louses is the best way to increase your social media presence, and consequently, the easiest way to attract new followers (and Trolls). You can post 1 louse during your turn.

How to Post a louse:

1. To post a louse, draw the top card from your louse deck and place it face up in the center of the table.
2. Decide what you want your louse to say! Come up with a short sentence (or a few sentences) that you want to express to your community. You may come up with the contents of you louse on your own, or, you may follow the prompt listed on your louse card.
3. Once you decide on what your louse will say, it then begins to generate **Comments**. Pull a number of cards from the **Common Deck** equal to the number indicated on the louse card plus your current number of Personal Followers. Place those cards in a column underneath your post. Those cards are now connected to that post as **Comments**.

Handling Responses

There are a four different types of **Comments** that can be generated by the Common Deck, and each is handled a bit differently. Below are the actions you'll need to take when each Comments is generated:

- **Followers**: A fanbase of dedicated Followers is crucial to the success of your game, and will allow your posts to generate even bigger responses in the future. When a there is a Follower (or Followers) connected directly to one of your posts (is in a column underneath one of your posts with no posts from other players in between) that Follower counts as your **Personal Follower.** Move the the tracker on your Personal Follower Tracker up by 1 for each new Follower generated by a post. These Followers also count towards the groups total of **Communal Followers.** Whenever a Follower (or Followers) is generated on any post, the Celebrity moves the the Communal Follower Tracker up by 1 for each new Follower generated by that post. **Your team will need at least 20 Followers by the end of the week in order to win the game**, so be sure to keep track of your Followers!
- **Trolls:** Trolls are the people on the Internet who want to see you burn. They'll say any nasty thing they can to make you, your team, or your community feel like less than a person. In trying to foster a positive online community for your game, it's your job to keep the number of Trolls to a minimum. However, sometimes trolling is simply inevitable. Whenever any post generates a Troll (or Trolls) the

Moderator moves the Troll Meter on the Toxicity Tracker up by 1 for each new Troll generated.

    - **Toxicity:** As is oft to happen, having too many Trolls in one place will breed even more Trolls. Whenever the total number of trolls reaches a new **Critical Level** (as indicated on the Troll Meter on the Toxicity Tracker) the general **Toxicity Level** of your game's louse page will increase. When the Troll Meter reaches a new critical level, the Moderator raises the Toxicity Meter on the Toxicity Tracker up by 1. When your community has become toxic, **each new post you make will automatically generate a number of Trolls equal to current Toxicity Level before generating any Comments from the Common Deck.** If the Toxicity Level is at 1 or higher, when making a new post, place Troll cards from the **Dedicated Troll** decks whose combined value equals the current Toxicity Level onto that post automatically. **The number of Comments that that post generates from the Common deck is also reduced by the value of the current Toxicity Level** (ex. A post that generates 5 Comments from the Common Deck at Toxicity Level 0 will instead generate 1 Troll from the Dedicated Troll Deck and 4 Comments from the Common Deck at Toxicity Level 1). It's important to manage the toxicity of your game's louse page, because once the well is poisoned, it says poisoned forever. **Once the Toxicity Level has reached a Critical Level it will never go back down again**. Be sure get a handle on your Troll problem while you still can!

- **Regular Comments:** Regular Comments are made by people who just want to say something. They aren't an active detriment to your community, but they won't raise your Follower numbers either. However, in general, Commenters have nice things to say!
- **@Comments:** Sometimes commenters will want to hear directly from a particular member of the team. Whenever an @Comment is generated on a post, whichever player is indicated by the @Comment must immediately make a post responding to that comment (regardless of whether or not it is that players turn). When responding to an @Comment, move that @Comment slightly right of the other Comments. That @Comment is added to the original posts **Chain**, and is treated as a louse card. **Posts made in response to @Comments only generate Comments equal to the number of the poster's Personal Followers.** Pull an appropriate number of Comments from the Common Deck (or the Dedicated Troll Decks if the Toxicity Level is greater than 0) and place them under the @Comment card in a column.

Playing Reaction Cards

In addition to posting louses, you may also perform additional actions during your turn by playing **Reaction Cards** from your hand. You may play only 1 Reaction Card from your hand during each of your turns. All Reaction Cards (except Re-louse cards) are immediately discarded and removed from the game after being played. The effects of each Reaction Card are explained below:

- **Comment (reaction)**: Commenting allows you to respond to an existing post, and your Followers will chime in as well. When you play a Comment Card, choose an existing post (that is at the end of a Chain) and add Comments to it equal to the number of your Personal Followers. Commenting is unaffected by the Toxicity Level; when adding Comments to a post via the Commenting Reaction, you need only pull Comments from the Common Deck, regardless of the current Toxicity Level. The **Celebrity** loves to engage with their fanbase, and thus **the Celebrity has the most Comment cards in their Reaction Deck.**

- **Re-louse**: Sometimes you don't want to make your own post, but instead, you want to re-post a previously existing post. When you play a **Re-louse** card, choose an existing post (at the end of a Chain) and place a Re-louse Reaction card from your hand onto the bottom of its Chain (at the bottom of its column of Comments). The Re-louse Reaction Card is now treated as a louse card. However, when a post is made as a Re-louse, it generates Comments equal to your current Personal Followers *plus* the current number of Personal Followers of the player you Re-loused. If you Re-louse one of your own posts, the Re-louse post will only generate Comments equal to your current Personal Followers. In either case, pull an appropriate number of Comments from the Common Deck (or the Dedicated Troll Decks if the Toxicity Level is greater than 0) and place them under the @Comment card in a column. The **Socialite** likes to foster community by Re-lousing posts from their teammate, and thus **the Socialite has the most Re-louse cards in their Reaction Deck.**

- **Delete**: Sometimes, the only way to deal with the trolls on a thread is to wipe out that thread entirely. When you play a Delete Reaction card from your hand, select 1 **Chain** on the table (a post, as well as all posts connected to it via @Comments and Re-louses) and clear it from the table. All louse cards in the removed Chain are returned to their owner's deck and those decks are shuffled. All other cards in the chain (Reaction Cards and Comments) are removed from the game. When a Chain is deleted, all players who had followers in the removed

Chain adjust their Personal Follower Trackers to reflect their new (smaller) number of Personal Followers on the table. In addition the Celebrity should adjust the Communal Follower Tracker to reflect the new total number of Followers on the table, and the Moderator should adjust the Toxicity Tracker to reflect the new total number of Trolls on the table. Deleting is a good way to guarantee removal of Trolls from your community, but you might also lose followers depending on what you delete. As the de-facto community manager, the **Moderator** makes the most liberal use of deleting, and thus **the Moderator has the most Delete cards in their Reaction Deck.**

- **Troll Challenge**: Although it is accepted as common knowledge on the Internet that one must not "feed the trolls," sometimes you just can't help yourself. Sometimes you just have to say something! By playing a Troll Challenge Reaction card, you can challenge the trolls in a single chain on the table. When playing a Troll Challenge card, select a Chain on the table that you wish to challenge. Then, draw cards from the Common Deck until you draw either a Follower or a Troll. If you draw a Follower, you win the the Troll Challenge and all Trolls are removed from the selected Chain. However, if you draw a Troll, you lose the Troll Challenge and the trolls multiply; replace all Troll cards in the Chain with Troll Cards from the Dedicated Troll decks with values 1 higher than the Troll being replaced (ex. Troll cards are replaced with Troll x 2 cards, Troll x 2 Cards are replaced with Troll x 3 cards, etc.) Regardless of the result of the Troll Challenge, the Moderator should adjust the Toxicity Tracker to reflect the new total number of Trolls on the table. All Comments drawn from the Common Deck for the purposes of determining the result of the Troll Challenge are removed from the game. The **Troll Bait** is a bit of a hot-head, and is easily goaded into conflict with the Trolls. As such, the **Troll Bait has the most Troll Challenge cards in their Reaction Deck.**

Ending a Day

Once every player has taken a turn, the day is over. All player Shuffle their unused Reaction Cards from their hands into their Reaction decks, and a new day begins at the **Beginning of the Day**.

~ Ending the Game ~

The game ends when one of the following three ending conditions are met. There is 1 **Winning Condition** and 2 **Losing Conditions.**

Successful Launch
Win: If the Communal Follower count is at 20 Followers or greater at the end of the 7th day, your team's game has a successful and adequately hyped up launch. The players win and your game goes on to be the sensation of the decade!

Unsuccessful Launch
Loss: If the Communal Follower count is at 19 Followers or fewer at the end of the 7th day, your team's game fails to impress on its launch day, and falls into obscurity; lost in the deepest bowels of the Steam Library. The players lose the game.

Toxic Community
Loss: At any point during the game, if the Toxicity Meter on the Toxicity Tracker is at 6 (or if there are 30 total Trolls on the table), your community is considered too toxic to sustain itself; it is a breeding ground for trolls and hateful rhetoric. The players lose, and you are forced to quit social media, shut down your community, and postpone the launch of your game indefinitely.

Design Process Statement

Brainstorming Phase:
After we received the *Louse and Flea* story, we spent time analyzing its narrative and aesthetics. To our understanding, the story is all about mass panic and chain reactions. Every character's reaction contributes to the final tragedy.

Then we tried to find some existing games with elements of mass panic and chain reactions to get some inspiration. The games we looked at were:

- *MouseTrap*: Rube Goldberg contraption, but the chain reaction isn't really reflected in the gameplay
- *Snake* - You have to keep chaining things, but the more you chain, the less stable it becomes; also games like *Russian Roulette* and *Exploding Kittens*
- *Betting games* -- stakes are mounting. System where you want to avoid escalating, but ultimately cannot.

By analysing these games and ideas, we eventually landed on a social network theme. We conceived a cooperative game in which every player must take his/her own actions to contribute to the final story/result. The game should include some common social network elements like posting, commenting, "retweeting", following, and getting trolled.

Prototype Phase:
Even though we had an idea for our game, we still had a hard time to figuring out how to design the mechanism that works for the aesthetics. To solve this problem, we played a cooperative board game called *Forbidden Island* to get some inspiration. We really appreciated the water level mechanic in the game; once the water level increases, it will never goes back. This water system created a encroaching feeling of dread as the game went on. In the late game, every player must risk flooding the island by drawing a water increase card. It fit our Louse and Flea story so well. We also liked the roles design in the system. With different abilities, each player can contribute to the play in his/her own way. We thought we can use similar systems in our game to create similar aesthetics.

Then came the prototype phase. To introduce the feeling of a threat, we decided to set time limitation that all players should work together to hit a specific target by the end of day 10. The "toxicity level" mechanic can be used like the water level in *Forbidden Island* as a source of impending doom, equivalent. We also set roles with different abilities. After carefully discussing how to post and how to generate comments, trolls and followers, we got the outline of our first prototype.

Revision Phase:
With the basic rules, we tried to play the game several times by ourselves. We had some problems that were caused by the ambiguity of rules or card descriptions. For example, when one player tried to re-louse another player, it was often confusing to figure out exactly how many comments it would generate. To solve this problem, we simulated some edge situations and discussed the related rules. We also found it difficult to keep track of the number of followers, trolls and overall toxicity level. Our solution was to create different counter pieces with user-friendly visual design. At the same time, we put one player in charge of each specific calculation in game, thereby divided up the counting tasks. By doing so, we successfully decreased the complexity of tracking different numbers.

Then we had several rounds of playtests. We got a lot of useful feedback regarding interaction between players, the toxicity level making the later game depressing, the predictability of the game, the counting was still time consuming, etc. Aside from the feedback caused by the ambiguity of the rules, we found the lack of player-player interaction, and the unstable game pace, were the two most important issues we should solve.

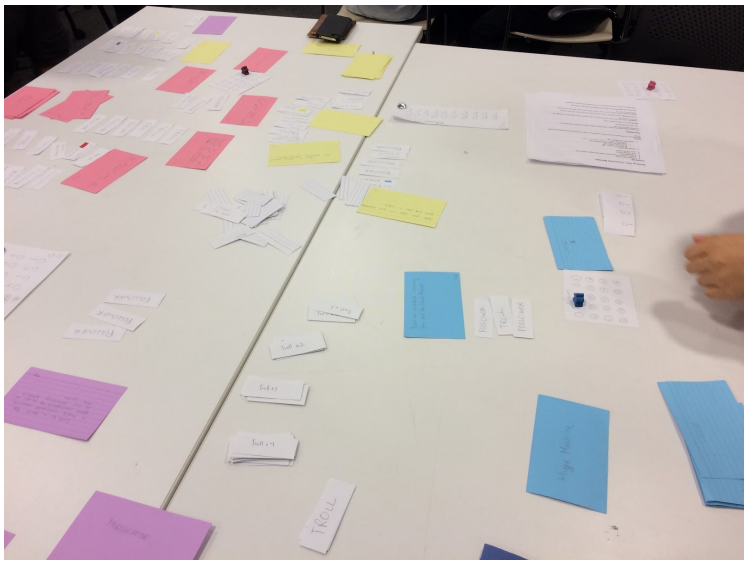
To solve the game pacing problem, we changed the target date from 10 to 7. At the same time, we adjusted the ratio of follower cards and troll cards to make the early game more difficult and give players more choices in later game. For the lack of interaction issue, we discussed the possible reasons and found it may be caused by the role ability settings. In the previous playtests, we noticed that after several rounds, the player who has ability to delete any thread on the table (the Moderator) would keep deleting threads in the later game. At the same time, the player who had the ability to generate more followers by re-lousing other players' post (the Celebrity) had little chance to do so in the whole game. Even though we liked the role ability factor, it still needed a lot of tweaking. We replaced the role abilities with different action cards distributed according to each player's role. By introducing the action cards, we successfully increased the chance that players can interact with each other. It also helped to solve the game pacing problem because players have more choices to make during each turn.

Finalization Phase:
After the revision phase, we looked back into our game and discussed if anything could be improved to make the game work better. Aside from the card balancing issue, we also found that we need to tweak the game mechanics a little bit. In our previous version, we found that deleting a whole thread was the only way a player can deal with the existing trolls. It made the game a bit passive. To solve this problem, we designed a "troll challenge" action card that can deal with a bunch of trolls directly instead of just deleting them. It's a really interesting design: by playing the troll fighting card, player should draw cards from the common card pile to see if he/she can get support from his/her followers. The uncertainty and challenge of winning the troll fight made the game more fun to play. Additionally, the introduction of troll fighting card give players more space to choose their actions. With all these adjustments we successfully finished our finalization phase.

Playtest Photos



Earlier iterations of the game.









The current iteration of the game.