

King Rat



A 24 Hour Role Playing Game
by
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*"...for 'ts better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav'n"
- John Milton, "Paradise Lost"*

In this game players take the role of King Rats - persons with the goal of creating their own empires in a closed community. Whilst trying to achieve this goal, they need to survive in a not-too-pleasant environment (be it a POW camp, a megacorporation, a prison or a religious organization). Apart from surviving, they are all trying to obtain The Thing: an object, a piece of information, a weapon - something that can grant its owner wealth or power sufficient to last till the Exodus - the foretold time when the walls shall crumble and everyone will regain their freedom.

This game is basically diceless. It can also be very competitive, depending on the gaming style of the group. Every player and GM will need two sheets of paper, one called the Setting Sheet (for setting information), the other called the Royal Sheet (for information about their Player Character). It would also be wise to have lots of scratchpaper handy.

Genesis

1. ...where the Rats scurry - Creating the Nest

The first step that needs to be taken in order to play the game is creating the environment in which the game is going to take place, from now on called **The Nest**. There are several basic characteristics that need to be decided collectively by the players and the GameMaster:

The Setting - when and where does the game take place? It can be anything from a small island in quasi-prehistoric times through a giant corporation building to a decrepit orbital station in far-future space opera. The only requirement is that there can be virtually no escape. The Nest itself doesn't have to be a place per se; it can be an organization one can't leave (like The Party in George Orwell's *1984*).

Rats - who are the inhabitants of The Nest? Why are they there? They can be anything from POWs through members of a lost spaceship crew to computer gamers trapped in a virtual reality multiplayer game. Still, they need to be as normal as possible - no unbalancing superpowers. They are the subjects in King Rats' domain.

The Oppressors - who or what governs The Nest? What is their reason for creating The Nest? What rules are enforced on Rats? The Oppressors are the only NPCs that King Rats can't oppose directly, but often rely on in creating their kingdoms. Oppressors can be anything from POW camp guards through crazed AI (think Harlan Ellison's *I have no mouth and I must scream*) to leaders of a political organization. Being King Rat always attracts Oppressors' attention.

The Thing - an object, a piece of information, a weapon or something else entirely that can grant it's owner enough power to survive until it's time to leave The Nest (similarly to the jewel ring from James Clavell's *King Rat*). Keep the idea you come up with now somehow vague - the specific nature of The Thing will reveal itself in the course of the game.

Upon deciding on these characteristics, write them down on the Setting Sheet (it would be best if each player had one).

2. Bestial status-quo - Dividing Global Resources

The next step is dividing The Nest's **Resources** (called **Global Resources**). These can be used by players to their advantage (more on their use later on). There are four basic Resources and their values are up to GM's discretion, based off decisions made by the group when creating The Nest. The basic value of all the Resources shouldn't exceed <the number of PCs> x 4, but it can change during the game (more on that later). All except the last one are perishable.

Wealth - amount of money, or its substitute, circulating in The Nest. Also value of items and/or information that can be traded or bartered. If money doesn't have too much importance in your setting, change it to anything that can be used instead.

People - other human beings living in The Nest that can be used by King Rats to further their goals. These are not your average Rats; they are the so-called Non Player Characters that can be used in Scene Resolution. They can even be some of the lesser Oppressors.

Contraband - anything deemed illegal by The Oppressors. It cannot be used in the open, but carries a lot of weight among Rats.

Subsistence - anything that Rats and King Rats alike need to survive. Food, basic clothing, medicine etc. It's the only Resource that is automatically restored every round.

Write down all Global Resource values on the Setting Sheet.

3. The makings of a king - Creating King Rats

When every aspect of the setting had been agreed on, it's time for the players to create their alter egos, the King Rats. King Rats are inherently wiser, stronger and more capable than other Rats (at least currently), thus they can best any non-king Rat physically and mentally, with very few exceptions. King Rats know their potential and, seeing that the situation they're in allows that, want to gain power over the lesser beings. They do this using resources at hand. That is why the only statistical descriptors of King Rats are

Resources, identical to those describing The Nest.

Let every player assign up to 12 points between their **Personal Resources**. The only difference between Global and Personal Resources is that personal *Subsistence* isn't restored daily. Write them down on the Royal Sheet.

Each King Rat is also described by his or her **Background**. It can be anything from their criminal record through education to their social standing. Each player may choose up to three **Background Descriptors**, but at least two of them have to be connected to their presence in The Nest.

Next the players'll have to come up with several Rats that somehow rely on your character (at least as many as your *People* personal resource). They may be debtors, people whom the PC has saved from untimely demise or someone whom they can blackmail. These Rats constitute the starting **Royal Family** and can be used as the *People* personal resource.

If your players want to create really grand King Rats, then instead of listing their descriptors and royal family they should write down their King Rats' life stories on their Royal Sheets and underline all Background Descriptors and starting Royal Family members' appearances for future reference.

There's also one more thing that needs to be done when creating King Rats - setting the starting level of **Hatred**. Hatred is the numerical representation of the level to which certain Rats or Oppressors despise the King Rat. In the beginning it shouldn't be lower than the number of Royal Family members.

Beginning King Rats don't have any **Relationships**, but these will form in the course of the game.

And finally, tell each player to assign themselves a random number (or roll d100 if you're such a dice-junkie).

The Book of Life

4. The laws of nature are a harsh mistress - Playing the Game

The game usually begins some time after transferring all Rats and King Rats to The Nest. The game is divided into sessions, and each session consists of a number of **scenes**. Each session begins with an **introduction** narrated by the GM (the introduction should give the players an overview of what happened in The Nest lately). Then scenes come into play. One scene revolves around one player's King Rat and is narrated mostly by the player. Normally, every player narrates a scene after the other according to their number, in order from highest to lowest. Each complete series of scenes is called a **round**. Between player-narrated scenes the GM can narrate **interludes**, which can, but don't have to, involve King Rats directly.

If a player wants to narrate a scene out of normal order, he or she has to outbid other players (and gain the consent of the GM) by promising to spend more Personal Resources than others. Each player can bid only once a round. When a bid is won, the winner is treated as if he had the lowest number assigned for one round (and still has to narrate his scheduled scene). If the scene doesn't live up to the promise, the player loses his narration rights for two rounds.

If a player doesn't want to narrate his scheduled scene, he loses his narration rights in the next round.

If the players are new to the game, the GM should narrate the first scene, one which involves all King Rats preferably.

4.1 The theater called life - Scenes

Scenes are small frames in which life is enclosed. And, just like in life, their protagonists are never in total control of what happens.

When narrating a scene, the player should state the scene's **objective** (what he wants to achieve in that scene). This can be anything from learning something about The Thing, making a transaction on the black market or striking a deal with the Oppressors. Then the player states which Personal

Resource they'd like to use in order to achieve their objective (only one point at a time). If they're feeling lucky, they may try to rise the stakes of the scene and set more objectives (or even have to, if they earned the right to narrate the scene by outbidding other players), but, as with everything, there's a catch.

Whenever additional Personal Resources are spent in a given scene, there's a possibility of **complication**. Complication is the nasty little thing that occurs when other players decide to spend their resources on making the narrating player's life miserable (or maybe helping him out, who knows). They can introduce members of their Royal Families to the scene (by spending their *People* resource), send a messenger with a counter-offer or even appear personally.

Personal appearance in another player's scene costs 3 Personal Resource points, a 3 point gain in Hatred or losing out on a Relationship (more on Relationships later on). When another King Rat decides to enter a scene, the player controlling him or her takes the narration rights over, but only right after entering the scene or when spending additional resources to change the scene's conclusion to their liking (what, in turn, gives other players a chance of entering the scene. Hurray complication!)

To make things worse, when players are reluctant at unleashing complication on other players, the GM should introduce some complication of his own and make other players miserable in an interlude for not making other players miserable (or not helping them out). Lack of action brings reaction.

Apart from using the depletable Personal Resources, players may get an advantage in a scene by invoking one of their Background Descriptors. If during their narration players manage to include a reference to one of their descriptors, they may spend one Resource point without invoking complication.

A scene's **conclusion** is either achieving the goal set by the narrating player, achieving it partially, failing at achieving it with no apparent consequences, or failing miserably with an appalling outcome. The more points are spent during a scene, the greater is the effect of the scene's conclusion on the game.

All Personal Resources spent during a scene are added to their Global counterparts. If achieving a set objective would result in gaining any Resources by the player, they are deducted from the Global Resources pool. If the objective was achieved with the help of another King Rat, its spoils are shared. If the objective wasn't achieved with the help of another King Rat, the mean person gets all the profits, but only if she appeared in the scene personally. If not, nobody gains a thing and all used Personal Resources become Global.

4.2 The theater called life; act 2 - Interludes

Interludes are scenes in which the narrative stance is taken over by the GM. In interludes players should be shown the effects the outcome of player-narrated scenes had on The Nest and Rats. All changes in the values of Global Resources should be made apparent to the players, as well as the effects of their Relationships and Hatred. The GM may change the value of Global Resources during interludes.

The GM can introduce King Rats in his interludes, but in that case they can spend no Resources and can't use their Backgrounds to gain anything. Their Relationships can change, though. Players can influence the outcome of the interludes only if they decide to enter them of their own will and are willing to spend at least one Personal Resource point in the course of the interlude. They do not gain narration rights, though.

4.3 The theater called life; act 3 - Rats and Oppressors

When narrating scenes, all Rats belonging to the Royal Family are role-played by players evoking them. All other Rats, however introduced to the scene, are role-played by the GM.

Rats themselves don't have any characteristics or statistics (unless one of them becomes a relationship). Whenever they act as if they were using Resources, the points are subtracted from the Global Resources pool.

Remember, Rats aren't just pawns in the hands of King Rats. They have their own will, their own opinions and, most probably, ferociously dislike every King Rat. If any Rat is mistreated, the Hatred factor rises (one point for each

abuse). If any given Rat feels constantly mistreated, ignored or abused, the poor mammal will become the abuser's **Enemy**. If a Rat is constantly fed, given money or helped in any way, it may become King Rat's **Friend** (more on Enemies and Friends later on). The above also applies to the members of the Royal Family.

A Rat can become a member of the Royal Family if at least two Personal Resource points are spent on it (with the exception of the *People* resource). Most members of the Royal Family need to be spent Resources on in order to keep them among the royalty.

Opressors are controlled exclusively by the GM, but they can be introduced to any scene by the players at the cost of two different Personal Resource points.

Opressors cannot become members of the Royal Family, but can become Relationships.

5. Bonds of love, bonds of hate - Hatred and Relationships

King Rats never go unnoticed. They attract attention while going smugly down the beaten road; they attract attention when cooking their meals, they attract attention by smoking their cigarettes. And all the observers feel one thing. Deep in their hearts, they feel what everyone feels when seeing someone being smug and fed when everyone is hungry and glum. They feel **Hatred**.

King Rats are wiser, stronger and more able than other Rats, true. But when Hatred overcomes them, they can be very, very dangerous. That's when they find the will to survive, just to have that one go at their sworn enemies who dared to be better than they are.

Hatred can be gained for many different things (if being a King Rat wasn't enough). Spending Personal Resources openly when their Global values are very low (especially *Subsistence*).

For every five Hatred points, the player gains an **Enemy**, someone who hates the King Rat so much as to do anything just to bring him down, make him

miserable. Enemies are the most unwelcome of **Relationships**. Every Enemy can be called upon once a round by the GM or other players during scenes and interludes without any cost whatsoever. Enemies should be introduced by the player who made them in their very next narrated scene.

In the very rare case a King Rat befriends an Oppressor, this King can call upon him once every two rounds without any cost. If an Oppressor becomes a King Rat's Enemy... well, then the King is most likely boned. Enemy Oppressors may be called upon by anyone once a round during any scene involving the boned King Rat. Their rage doesn't center solely on their hated King Rat, though, so be wary.

For every five points of Hatred lost, the player can get rid of one of his enemies, but at the cost of one Personal Resource point. For every 3 points of Hatred gained by acting towards Enemies they become even more aggressive, thus allowing other players to introduce one of them twice a round. It's best to keep track of your Enemies on the Royal Sheet.

Getting new **Friends** is a tad more difficult than getting new Enemies. If a King Rat wants to befriend someone, they need to spend at least one point per every scene on the person they want to befriend (two if it's an Oppressor). Certain Resources may not work for some Rats - they may not want or need them. They also need to be nice to them. If all the requirements are met, an uneasy friendship is struck, partially based on feelings, and partially on material reliance.

Friends can be called upon by King Rats whenever they want to gain the upper hand in a scene, either by using their Friends like Personal Resources they actually don't have to pay or to negate the effects of introducing Enemies. Every Friend can be used as many times a round as the player pleases, but every time they do it an interlude follows, depicting a falling-out with the Friend. If the player's King Rat is unable to appease his Friend (either by spending Resources or simply talking some sense into him), their Relationship suffers a **crisis**. If the number of crises becomes greater than the number of rounds the friendship has lasted, the relationship ends.

There's also one more special kind of Relationship - a **Business Relationship**. Whenever King Rat trades, exchanges information or otherwise makes

business with someone on a regular basis (at least once every three rounds), they become his Business Relationship. Business Relationships are a good way of exchanging Personal Resources. Such relationships can also be used to start a Friendship with someone.

Exodus

6. King among Rats - the Endgame

Nothing is eternal. Nothing can last forever. No Hell can be infinite... or is it really Hell?

All those sessions, rounds, scenes and interludes lead to the inevitable end of the game. The definite end of the game is the **Exodus**, the time everyone awaits impatiently, struggling to survive till that blissful moment. Its approach is most visible when one of King Rats becomes **The King**, the person holding ultimate power over other King Rats and Rats alike. King Rats may also fail completely and be forced to merge with the herd of Rats or maybe even... die.

6.1 If I forget thee, oh life - failing as a King

Sometimes it happens that a promising King Rat fails to live up to his potential. There are two ways in which this may come about: the overall Hatred may become so overbearing that an animosity gets out of control... and an Enemy (or a conspiring group of Enemies) leads to the downfall of the hated King Rat. When the Hatred stat rises above four times the *People* Personal Resource for two rounds, the next interlude ends in the King Rat's demise.

A King Rat may also fall because his influence diminishes to the level comparable with that of the most meager of Rats. If any Personal Resource drops to zero for over two rounds, the fallen-from-grace King Rat is forced to return between lesser Rats during his scheduled scene.

6.2 The tree of life be mine... - becoming The King

There are two ways in which a King Rat can become The King. The first is obtaining The Thing in a series of scenes dedicated to just that. Although those scenes may be resolved cooperatively, The Thing can be owned by only one person, and the final scene about obtaining The Thing must be won by one player only. Then it's up to the player to protect The Thing from other King Rats, his Enemies and the more ambitious Rats until its owner gets to

narrate a scene where its potential can be realized. If the owner fails to protect his precious, it's up for the grabs.

After utilizing The Thing, one of the lucky King Rat's Personal Resources becomes infinite, thus earning him the title of the undisputed KING.

The title can also be achieved by amassing all points from one Global Resource three rounds in a row. The Resource value must equal zero at the end of each round, and all of the Global Resource have to be in possession of one King Rat. When it is so, the Personal Resource of choice becomes infinite, and the King Rat becomes truly KING.

6.3 Paradise Regained... or Lost? - The Exodus

If any of the players becomes The King, the **Exodus** is getting near. Only several weeks more, months maybe - three or four rounds. Although The King holds almost infinite power, others still don't give up their Hatred. Their hate may have escalated, but The King is powerful enough to even hold some of the Oppressors at bay. During these several weeks, most Rats are preoccupied with the incoming news of The Exodus - but some still plot against The King.

Exodus is the long-awaited rescue mission. It is the coming of your allies. The downfall of the organization you all've been forced to belong to. It is the definite end.

Using what resources they have left, remaining King Rats can either try to speed-up the Exodus or mine The King's kingdom in what scenes they have left. The King's main objective is postponing the Exodus for as long as it is possible.

But, when the long-awaited moment finally comes, a final round of scenes is played. No more bidding, for resources are no longer important. Just coming to terms with Relationships, Enemies and Friends, saying good-bye to the place where kingdoms were raised and fell. Let The King narrate the final scene. For he was truly King.

King among Rats.