

Migrant Stories



A roleplaying game about being different in a different place

Written by Nell Raban

Powered by the Apocalypse

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Migrant Stories is written and designed by Nell Raban, based on D. Vincent Baker's *Apocalypse World*. Cover art by Ivan Lee.

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What is it?

Migrant Stories is a game where players tell the stories from the perspective of immigrants. It's best played with at least four players, with at least one of those players running the game as the game master. You'll need paper and pencils for everyone, and each player besides the one running the game will need two six-sided dice.

Migrant Stories is Powered by the Apocalypse, which means that it's based on the game *Apocalypse World* by D. Vincent Baker. It also draws inspiration from other PbtA games, such as *Dungeon World*, *Sagas of the Islanders*, *The Hood* and *The Sprawl*.

How to play it

Playing a roleplaying game is a lot like improv comedy. Everyone playing gets to share their ideas about characters and situations they think would be interesting to tell stories about. It differs from improv in a few key ways, though: for one, it's not necessarily supposed to make people laugh, and for another, the rules are quite a bit stricter.

You begin by choosing a group to play and then deciding who is going to play a single character—"player characters"—and who is going to play the rest of the

world and other characters—“nonplayer characters”—also known as the game master. There should be only one person playing the game master. Only one person needs to play a character, but three to five player characters would be ideal.

Players controlling characters are limited to the actions, thoughts and feelings of their characters. They almost always have complete control of their characters. But to balance that, they don't get to have a say in details about the rest of the world, unless prompted by the game master or by a rule. The game master, on the other hand, doesn't get to meddle with the actions and thoughts of the player characters, but they have total control over all the nonplayer characters and the details of the world.

You're going to be telling the stories of immigrants in a new world, exploring their hopes and dreams and confronting their obstacles and demons. As a group, you get to decide where the immigrants are from as well as where they've come to, and you get to choose what kinds of problems they face.

You can think of the structure of the game like you would a novel or dramatic play. The game master begins by describing the situation on a large scale, peppering the scene with details—this is just like narration. When the chance comes for one of the characters to enter the scene, they describe what they do or say—their actions and dialogue. There's no formal turn-taking in the game, though; whoever has an idea can bring it up whenever appropriate.

Players don't just get to have their characters do whatever they like, though, since that wouldn't make for much of a game. Instead, when you want your character to do something, you can simply state your desire. This is where the game master's secondary role comes into play—interpreting the player's desire and deciding what rule to use in order to resolve that desire.

We call these rules “moves”. Most moves require that you roll two six-sided dice and add a modifier to the result. If the final result is a 10 or better, your character pretty much does what they wanted to do. If the result is a seven to nine, they succeed, but at

some cost. If the result is a six or less, the move fails, and something bad happens, and typically control of the story returns to the game master.

As this goes on and on, around and around, everyone should have a fair chance at sharing their ideas and creating story moments. If you ever feel like you're talking too much, try to back down and let others step in. If you feel as though you aren't sharing that much, take the initiative and step into the spotlight for a change. *Migrant Stories* should come alive with the proper balance of discussion, gameplay and storytelling.

How should it feel

Migrant Stories works best as a romantic social drama. Not romantic in the sense of “amorous”, but rather in the sense of “adventurous” or “colorful”. Players ought to get wrapped up in the awe and mystery of their characters’ new home, but at the same time worry about whom to trust and whom to fear—including other player characters and nonplayer characters alike. Daily life should feel like a real struggle to the characters, and it shouldn't feel difficult to make that a reality. If the game you're playing is tending toward grand adventure and operatic violence, then something's probably off.

Player basics

Each player creates their character by filling in these details on their character sheet:

Name

Every character has a name. It could be the name they were born with or a name they gave themselves. It could be a nickname, or simply a title.

Appearance

Decide what your character looks like. Do they have a full head of hair, or wear a distinctive headpiece? Are their clothes refined or in tatters?

Innate Traits

Some things are a matter of nature, or willpower, or fate. The following traits reflect your natural ability to accomplish things. Whenever you advance your character, you have the option of improving the value of one of your innate traits, once each.

Able

Reflects your physical power, fortitude or dexterity.

Shrewd

Your sense of judgement as well as your ability to think quickly.

Persuasive

Your way with people.

Perceived Traits

Some things are the unfortunate byproduct of fear, prejudice and ignorance. The following traits represent things other people may care or worry about more than your natural abilities. None may be higher than 2.

Dark

The complexion of your skin, for some reason, matters to people.

Strange

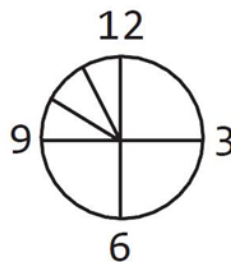
Perhaps it's the way you dress, or the shape of your facial features, but something about you stands out.

Accented

Your speech patterns, the words you choose, they say something about you.

Clocks

Everything you do in this game has a chance of advancing three clocks to midnight: Acceptance, Assimilation and Suspicion. These clocks are maintained by the game master, and they each look like this:



These clocks dictate which basic move is available to the players, depending on which is closest to midnight. When a clock strikes midnight, the game is over, in narrative accordance with that clock.

Moves

Acceptance move: *Avoid confrontation*

When you try to avoid confrontation...

...by standing tall or beating feet, **roll+Able**.

...by making them pause and think, **roll+Shrewd**

...by speaking with care, **roll+Persuasive**.

On a 10+, you do it. Also advance or regress any one clock by one tick. On a 7–9, regress this clock by one tick, and also choose:

- you flinch, hesitate, or stall: The GM can offer you a worse outcome, a hard bargain, or an ugly choice.
- It'll cost you.

On a failure, the GM will choose which clock to advance or regress, and then do something bad.

Assimilation move: *Appease*

When you try your best to appease, **roll plainly**.

On a 10+, you do it. Also advance or regress any one clock by one tick. On a 7–9, advance or regress this clock by one tick, and also choose:

- you flinch, hesitate, or stall: The GM can offer you a worse outcome, a hard bargain, or an ugly choice.
- It'll cost you.

On a failure, the GM will choose which clock to advance or regress, and then do something bad.

Suspicion move: *Make the best of a bad situation*

When you try to make the best of a bad situation...

...despite your skin color, **roll-Dark**.

...despite your customs, **roll-Strange**.

...despite your tongue, **roll-Accented**.

On a 10+, you do it. Also advance or regress any one clock by one tick. On a 7–9, advance this clock by one tick, and also choose:

- you flinch, hesitate, or stall: The GM can offer you a worse outcome, a hard bargain, or an ugly choice.
- It'll cost you.

On a failure, the GM will choose which clock to advance or regress, and then do something bad.

GM guide

Running a game of *Migrant Stories* should start as soon as everyone sits down and the players start creating their characters. Listen to the players as they talk about the sorts of people they want to portray and discuss with them what kind of setting these characters could live in. Some players' ideas might initially conflict with each other or with your own. That's okay; hash it out until you all have a good sense of where you are.

When it comes to the specifics of the setting, at the very least you'll need to start with the names of the country and city. To flesh those out, choose one option from each of the tag lists on your GM sheet. These tags should either help you and your players figure out details about their characters goals and fears or vice versa.

Once you have those details, create a scenario to kick off the game. Hopefully by now you've got plenty of ideas about situations and nonplayer characters to throw at the players. If you're struggling, ask you players bluntly what they're doing or what they want to pursue. Maybe even have them make the *Toil* move to see what their options are from the start. From there, slowly build the momentum of the story, introducing the players to each other and to other characters and opening the setting up to them.

No matter what, keep these agenda items in mind as you run the game:

- Make the new world seem dangerous
- Fill the PCs' lives with turmoil
- Play to discover and learn

Whatever you say and do as the game master in *Migrant Stories* should accomplish these three items on your agenda. Nothing else matters—not trying to kill the PCs, or teach them a lesson, or tell them your story while they sit back.

There are number of important principles to follow as well:

- Cast a suspicious eye on everything and everyone
- Talk to the characters, not the players
- Make your move, but misdirect
- Make your move, but never speak its name
- Give everyone a name and their own humanity
- Follow and build on your curiosity
- Think offstage too

These principles will help you stay inside the story of the game while remaining tactical and judicious about the decisions to make.

And those decisions manifest as moves. Your moves are different from player moves, though. You never have to roll to make a move. However, you do have to be more sparing and intentional about when to make a move, and which move to make.

- Separate the PCs
- Capture the PCs
- Head them off
- Warn them of what's coming
- Make them pay

- Trade harm with them
- Put a PC in a spot
- Inflict harm unto them
- Sap their will
- Tantalize them
- Turn the players' moves back on them
- Invoke a stereotype
- Make a threat's move

These are your moves. Make your moves when there's a lull in the conversation, when the players look at you expectantly or when the players roll a 6-. In the first two cases, you can make your moves soft, just to judge your players along. When they fail a roll, however, make as hard a move as possible. Never blindside your players with a move; it should always come naturally from the established fiction. And always, always, always finish your move by asking, "What do you do?"

Threats

Threats in *Migrant Stories* can take many shapes and sizes. When constructing your world, consider which of the below would be best suited to the story you and the players want to tell. Each one has an instinct or pattern of behavior they rely on to accomplish their goals. If you want to get fancy, give them their own moves, too.

Threats - and instincts:

- Government agents - purge
- Nationalists - terrorize
- Bigots - mistreat
- Average joes - condescend
- Zealots - demonize
- Politicians - restrict

Threats are your most reliable source of conflict and drama in *Migrant Stories*. Use them to test your player characters and take them to new places. They are a reminder of what's in the way of their reaching their goals, as well as of what's wrong with the world.

Still, don't shy away from internal conflict. There's no single correct way to play *Migrant Stories*, but the game reaches its greatest potential when there's strife among the player characters as well as between them as a whole and the rest of the world.