

The Louse and the Flea

By Jonathan Bove, Barry Kramer, and Rangan Anandan

Abstract

The Louse and the Flea is an exciting card game that revolves around the Brothers Grimm fairy tale of the same name. In the story, a flea causes mass hysteria when he weeps for a louse, who burnt himself while the two were brewing beer. All the other characters, which the players play as, begin to freak out! First a door begins to creak, then a broom begins to sweep, and so on and so forth until a poor girl breaks some glass. Players in the game have to constantly sit down and stand up as they are affected. The last player standing wins! But it's not that easy. Every time someone plays your character you have to sit down, and to stand you need to play cards in the order of the story, which isn't always so easy. Let's not forget about the Louse and the Flea, since they caused this whole mess! Anytime someone passes you a Louse or a Flea card it decreases your hand size, those dang troublemakers. However you may get lucky and play a Spring card, which washes away those buggers and lets you draw four new cards. The game fluctuates between peaceful order, and utter chaos.

Materials

- 6 Identity cards
- 60 Object cards
- 1 Louse card
- 1 Flea card
- 3 Spring cards

Rules

The Louse and Flea were brewing beer in an eggshell (because that's how they roll). The Louse fell in and burnt himself, causing the Flea to scream wildly. This caused other things in the room to become super excited. You are those other things!

STORY ORDER:

Door → Broom → Cart → Ash → Tree → Girl → *Door → Broom...*

Object:

The object of the game is to be the only player standing while all the others are seated.

Set up:

1. Have all the players stand in a circle. Deal out the identity cards counter-clockwise in story order, starting with the player who is closest to a door in real life.
2. Shuffle the rest of the cards and deal 4 to each player, placing the deck in reach of all players.
3. Flip over the top card of the deck to start the game (keep flipping over cards if the card is a *Louse*, *Flea*, or *Spring* until it is an object card).

On your turn:

When the object card corresponding to your identity is played, it is your turn. You are forced to **sit down** if you aren't already sitting, unless you can:

1. Play a card corresponding to your own identity. You stay standing and it is now the next player's turn in story order (e.g. if you are *Tree* it is now *Girl's* turn).

Note: The next player does NOT have to sit because you did not play their card.

OR

2. Play the next card in the story order to stay standing (e.g. if you are *Broom* you can play *Cart*). It is now the next player's turn in story order (*Cart* in this case).

Otherwise you must sit down and can play **any other** object card. It is now the player's turn that has that identity.

The Louse and the Flea

Whenever you are given or draw the *Louse* or the *Flea* card, your hand size is reduced by 1, and you must immediately discard a card. The *Louse* or *Flea* is placed in front of you, and you mark down your new hand size.

Once at least one turn has passed since you received the *Louse* or *Flea* card, you may pass them to another player. When it is your turn you may "attach" the *Louse* or *Flea* to

another object card by playing both at the same time. Place the object card in the discard pile, and pass the *Louse* or *Flea* to the corresponding player. This player must accept the new card, discard one from their hand, and play passes to them.

The Spring

Playing the *Spring* card removes the *Louse* and/or *Flea* cards from in front of you if you have either. Then you discard all your cards and draw a new hand of 4, removing any hand limit you previously had.

Design Process Statement:

Our challenge for this week was to design a game based on the fairy tale, “The Louse and the Flea”. In the story, a Louse and a Flea are brewing beer in an eggshell; however, the Louse falls in and sets off a linear chain reaction involving several objects, which ultimately results in a water spring violently drowning everyone. Our challenge was to somehow incorporate the story into our game, and bring out its narrative elements through the game’s design. It was a very difficult process for us initially, since we had a hard time finding ways to adhere to the story structure while creating a compelling game.

Our first idea was to create a linear game in which the story’s objects and sequence played an integral role in the gameplay. In this game, players moved across a linear board which represented the sequence of the story. In this game, players had cards which they could use to affect the board, and therefore player movement. Initial playtests yielded positive results, so we felt pretty optimistic.

However, further playtesting of this game made us realize that its mechanics were a bit too linear; while that made it incorporate the story well, it also made it too simple of a game. The game just didn’t offer much in terms of strategic depth, and our peer playtesters complained that they felt like the mechanics of the game were just too simple. So we decided that it would be in our best interests to start again from scratch.

Eric challenged us to think outside the confines of linearity, so we decided to scrap the idea of a linear game and explore the idea of a non-linear structure. We tried several different ideas and finally settled on a framework which we thought would be fun and interesting, yet would still capture the essence of the story. However, we still wanted to include the sequence of the story at least to a small extent, since it is ultimately what makes the story what it is.

Our new game involved players playing as a certain object in the sequence, and then playing cards which corresponded to the all other objects (players). All players began the game standing up. When a card was played, it affected the player whose object the card corresponded to; that player is required to sit down, unless he/she is able to play the next card in the sequence. Play was done in turns; the last affected player got to play the next card. The ultimate goal was to be the last player standing (literally). Louse, flea, and spring cards were added to the deck to yield special abilities, which would help flesh out their significance in the story. We felt like our game had potential to succeed; however, it would take several hours of tweaking and playtesting before we finally arrived at a final version.

The first version of our game had no turns; players simply played cards whenever they could. This made for an incredibly fast past game. At first we thought this is what we wanted, since the chaos would mimic the chaotic nature of the story. However, it yielded a major problem. The fast pace of the game required players to memorize the sequence and know it incredibly well; however, since the sequence was not intuitive (like if it had been in numerical or alphabetical order), it was nearly impossible to play effectively. We solved this by doing two things; first, we slowed down the pace of the game drastically by making it more turn based. Second, we required the players sit in order of the story, so that it made the sequence a bit more intuitive.

During the formal playtesting session, we got lots of excellent feedback which helped us refine our concept. It was great to see several emergent strategies we never anticipated, especially coming from amateur players. In fact, one group of playtesters actually sat down with us and brainstormed several ideas, even helping us test most of them. Their game design inexperience showed; a lot of their ideas ended up being relatively weak. However, some of their ideas were pretty strong and helped us craft a better game. One of the ideas they suggested which we ended up keeping was the idea of being able to prevent yourself from having to sit down by playing the next card in the sequence.

Ultimately, a few more hours of balancing and tweaking led us to our current game concept. We feel like the sequence of the story was preserved, as well as the significance of the Louse and the Flea (the starters of the sequence in the story) and the water spring (the ender of the sequence in the story). But more importantly, we feel like it was preserved within the framework of a good game.