Archipelago

A story game of destinies
By Matthijs Holter, 2007

❧ About the game

Archipelago is a story/role-playing game where each player controls a major character. Player take turns telling a part of their character's story, leading them towards their selected point of destiny, while other players interact with and influence that story.

Who is this game for?

If you like the story-telling part of games, and enjoy the creative challenge and inspiration that comes from working with others, this game is for you. If you like tactical mechanics, resource management, or player-vs-player competition, there are other games that might work better for you.

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∽ The game in play – a brief overview

On your turn, you'll narrate the actions and thoughts of your character. At the start of the session, you'll have chosen a *point of destiny* – an event that your character will experience during this session. You'll be guiding your character's story toward that point.

Anyone at the table, including yourself, can narrate other parts of the fiction - actions of other characters, descriptions of the environment, events that occur etc.

In addition, there are three things you can always do, no matter who's turn it is.

- If you're dissatisfied with something that another player narrates, because you don't think it fits into the story, you can tell that player: «Do it differently, please».
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- If another player narrates something you'd like to hear about, you can say «More detail, please».
- If you think the story should have some random input, or you want to resolve some point of tension, you can say «Draw a card».

Some players have *ownership of* certain elements of the fiction – such as magic, geography and culture. If they disagree with something that's being narrated about those elements, because it doesn't fit with their vision, they can try to stop that narration completely.
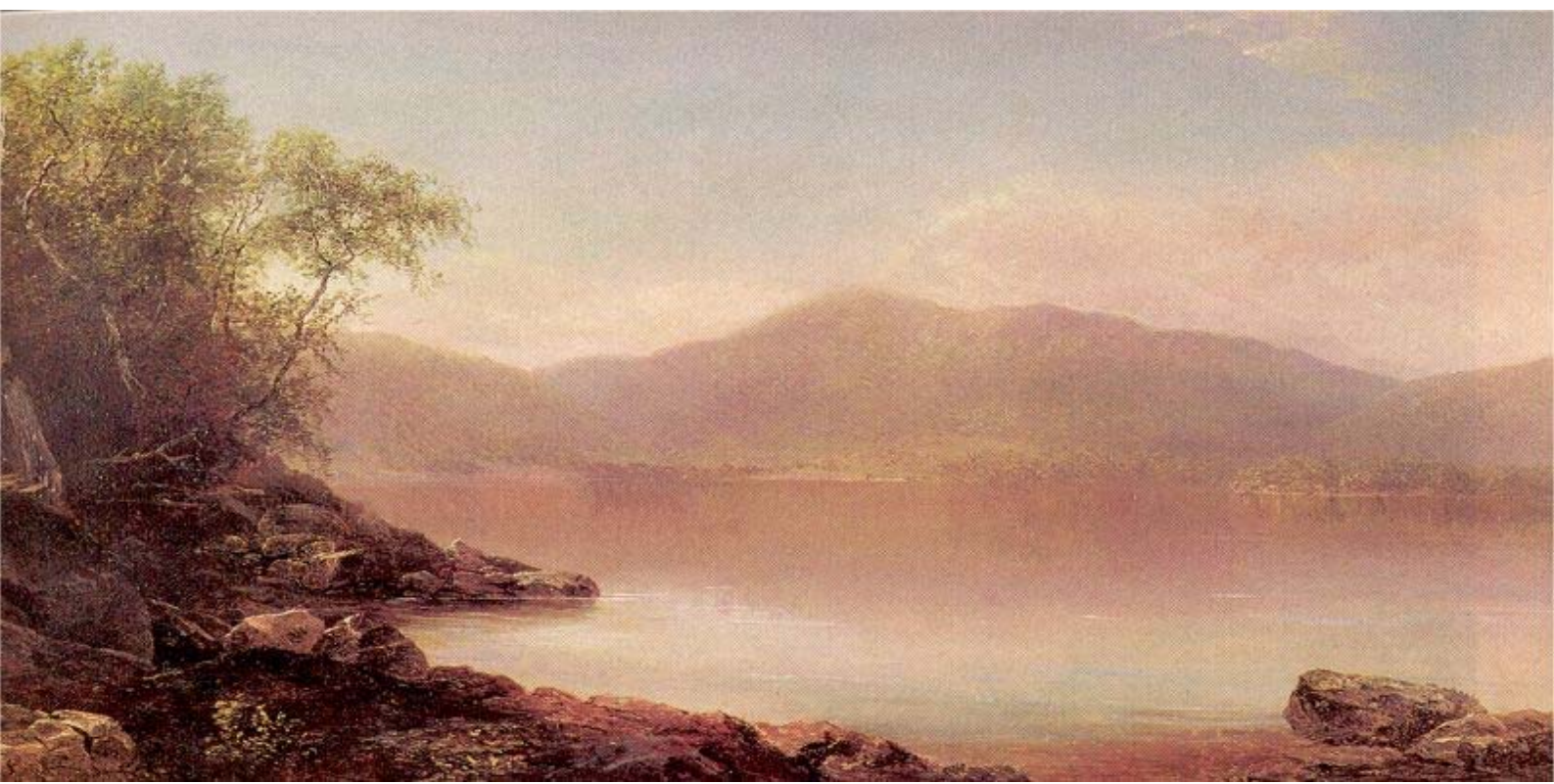
❧ Setting up the game

The first time you play, you'll need to do two things: Define the setting and create your characters. The setting you define as a group; characters are created individually, but you will want to talk to each other wile creating them – to get feedback, to make sure you're more or less on the same page, and just for fun.

Defining the setting

You should decide on one of two options: Either use an existing setting, or define a new one.

Using an existing setting

If you're using an existing setting, you should find a map for that setting and place it on the table. Talk about the setting a little bit – what's cool about it? How does it all work, again?

Set the game in a time or place that's not thoroughly defined in the setting. You want some space to explore and invent new places, people and cultures.

Decide what elements of the setting are central, and need someone to take *ownership* of them – someone who can say what fits and what doesn't.

> *Example: In Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea books, areas of ownership might be magic, culture and geography. If a player narrates something that's completely at odds with the books' descriptions of magic, someone should have the power to say: «That's just not right».*
>
> *You might want to set the game in a time period a few hundred years before the events described in the books. Otherwise, you'd easily end up just retelling the stories of the books' major characters Ged and Tenar, and having to make* your *stories fit in with theirs.*

It's often a good idea to expand the setting a little, to help the group feel more invested in the setting. As you do when defining a new setting, you can create new islands with names and descriptions.

Defining a new setting

Talk about what sort of setting you want. High fantasy or science fiction are suitable genres, though if you want to experiment with other genres, go ahead.

Decide what elements of the setting are central, and need someone to take *ownership* of them – someone who can say what fits and what doesn't. Decide who owns what. Ownership is a responsibility, so make sure the right people own the right things.

Grab a big piece of paper to draw a map on. Those who want to draw, get a pen or pencil and start drawing islands. You should draw at least five islands, more if you're going to play more than one session.

Give the islands names. Name other things on the map, too – oceans, currents, winds.

Give a few short descriptions of some of the islands. Provide one or two details, but

make sure a *lot* is undefined and open for exploration.

During this stage of the game, the usual rules for narration apply except «Draw a card». That means anyone can say «Do it differently, please» or «More detail, please». It also means players with ownership can try to veto things.

> *Example: You decide to go for a science fiction setting where your spaceship has crashed on a foreign planet that's almost completely covered in water, and your characters only know a few islands. You decide that the areas of ownership are geography, technology, culture – and the submarine environment, which you have a feeling may become important later.*
>
> *The group names a few islands - «Big Nose», «Cedaal», «Pariolish», six more. One of the oceans gets the name «Silvery Ocean».*
>
> *Someone says Cedaal is where you crashed; it has big cities, shining like the sun. You say «Yes, at night it's the only visible island – all the others are dark».*
>
> *Someone else says «Everyone there looks like little green men». You don't like that, so you say «Do it differently, please». They say «People there look like humans, only slightly taller and darker».*
>
> *You say «Shining cities... more detail, please». The player describes how the city is based on subterranean generators, and the buildings are some sort of organic crystalline structure.*

Creating characters

You should each think about what sort of character you want to play. Think out loud! Find out where your character comes from, and describe a few people that are important to them or their story. You should have the start of a story in mind; don't create characters that will just stay in one place and do nothing.

> *Example: You're playing in the Earthsea setting. You want a character that has been mighty, but has fallen. He's called Albiorth. You tell the group, and another player suggests that your character has been ostracized – thrown off his island of birth. You go with the idea, and tell the group that your character was rich and powerful, but had many enemies. Now he's alone in a boat, and very, very angry.*

After creating characters, each of you should put a playing piece – a coin, a token, a miniature figure – on the map to show where your character is. Make sure all pieces are different.

For many, it's helpful to have a list of names that can be used for secondary characters during the game. Write such a list together – about ten male and ten female names should help you get started.

↬ Starting the session

Each session, before you start playing, you each need a *destiny point* for your character. This is an event that will occur in the life of the character – something dramatic, significant, perhaps something that changes their life.

You'll create destiny points for each other. Everyone writes down one destiny point for each of the other players' characters – so if you're playing with four other people, you'll be writing down four different destiny points, one for each of them. When everyone's done, choose one of the destiny points the other players suggested for your character.

(For a two-player game, each player writes down two or three destiny points for the other player's character).

> *Example: You're playing with two others – one plays a young boy looking for his brother at sea; the other plays an old necromancer. For the first character you write down «He finds his brother dying of thirst in the West Reaches». For the second you write «He opens the portal to the Land of the Dead».*

> *You're playing Albiorth, an ostracized, wealthy man. The others suggest «He finds an ancient pirate treasure» and «He returns to wreak terrible revenge on his town of birth». You choose the second destiny point.*

When you've chosen your destiny, write it down on a sheet of paper and fold it up so that the others can see it at all times.

Note: If any of the destiny points affect more than one major character, *all* the players involved must agree to use it.

> *Example: If another player had the lost brother as a character, the destiny point «He finds his brother dying of thirst in the West Reaches» would have to be approved by both players – otherwise, the player would have to choose another destiny point.*

❧ Using destiny points

The destiny point is one of the most important parts of the game. It's what keeps your stories tight, what stops them from just flowing out and ending nowhere. You know what your character's destiny is for this session – play towards it! In each scene you'll be steering your character towards their destiny, and on the third or fourth turn you play, they should face that destiny.

Other players should help you get to the destiny point – by playing relevant secondary characters, describing fitting events etc.

After your destiny point has been played out, you may choose to let your story rest for this session. If so, you still participate in the others' stories as always, but when it's your turn to portray your character, just skip your turn.

When all characters have faced their destiny points, it's probably a good time to end the session.

> *Example: In your third scene, Albiorth disembarks on a small, barren island and meets a little girl. In an earlier scene, another player described how this girl was the carrier of a horrible disease. Albiorth is supposed to «wreak terrible revenge on his town of birth» - so you narrate how he takes the girl with him on a small boat and sails toward the town that ostracized him. His plan is to infect them with the disease.*
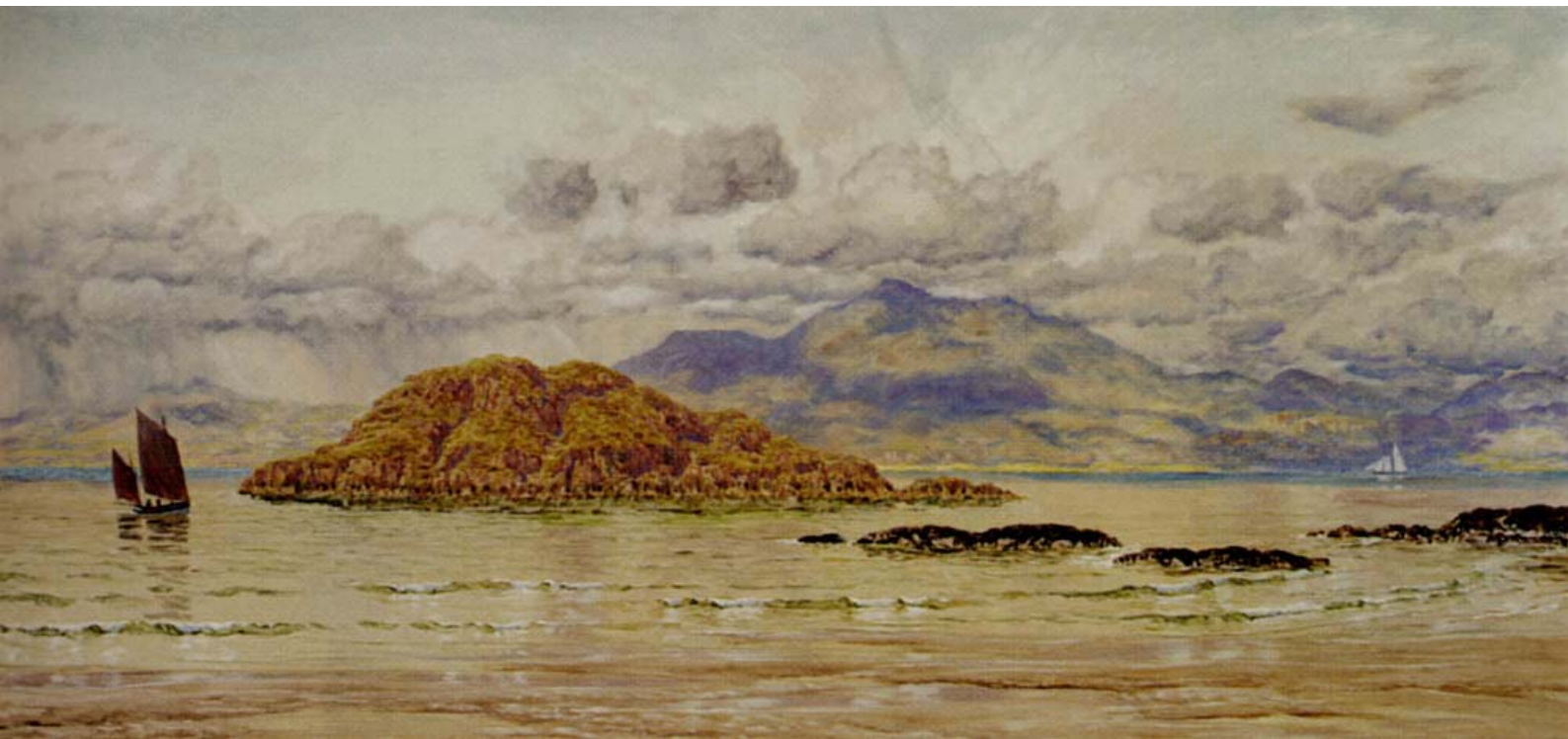
৯ What do you do on your turn?

On your turn, when your character is in focus, you do these things.

Set the stage

Describe where your character is and what's going on. Feel free to ask other players to describe settings, portray specific characters etc.

Move your playing piece, if necessary

In order to help other players remember where your character is at all times, it's a good idea to show the character's location on the map. Make sure to move your playing piece when the character changes location.

Portray your character

You control your character's actions, thoughts and dialogue at all times. The only exception is when someone tells you to draw a card – then whoever gets to narrate the outcome of the situation can narrate what your character does, and what happens to them. Nobody can say «Do it differently, please» when you narrate about your character.

Finish the scene

When you feel ready, you can end your turn and let the next player take their turn. It's important to remember that nobody else can tell you when to end your turn – it's completely up to you, so you have a lot of space and freedom to narrate in your own style and pace.

☙ What else can you do?

There are some things you can *always* do – whether it's your turn or not. Always have these options in mind – the game relies on your participation when it's *not* your turn.

Say «Do it differently, please»

If someone narrates something you don't think fits in the story or the situation, for whatever reason, you can say «do it differently, please». They then have to narrate something else – a variation on what they just said, or something completely different. You can specify exactly what you want different - «stop being silly», for example, or «I don't want my character in jail».

Don't be afraid to use this rule. In the beginning you might find yourself using it quite often; but after a while, when everyone starts getting a feel for what sort of narration fits in with the group's expectations, you'll probably find that you don't feel the need for this rule so much. It's a way of drawing a chalk line, saying to the other players: «This is cool, this isn't».

> *Example: Someone else says «The man who fell overboard comes out of the water again. His body is covered in blood, and he has a huge dead shark under his arm.» This is a bit over the top in your opinion, so you say «Do it differently, please – can we drop the shark?» The other player nods. «Okay, he comes up covered in blood. 'I had to fight off some sharks', he says.»*

Say «More detail, please»

When you want to hear more about what someone just narrated, you can say «more detail, please». This is a great tool to make sure you're all telling a story together, not just throwing out a synopsis. It also gives you the opportunity to test what the group wants to hear – if you gloss over an area you're unsure about, you'll know it's important to the others if they ask you to describe details.

> *Example: You say «The master talks about some rituals.» Another players says: «More detail, please!» You say: «Okay... He says: 'The water ritual that binds two people in marriage demands that they both carry a small bottle of water; spring water for the woman, well water for the man...'»*

Say «Draw a card»

If there's a challenge or a conflict, or you just want some random input from other players, you can say «draw a card». The current player decides what the character wants to happen right now. Then the current player picks one or two other players to narrate the outcome, and draws a card. A red card means the outcome is positive, probably what the character wanted; a black card means it's negative.

> *Example: Albiorth is facing a horrible storm, and his boat is old and leaky. Another player says: «Draw a card!» You pick one player to narrate a positive outcome, and another to narrate a negative one, and draw a card. It's black. The negative narrator says: «The first wave is huge, but Albiorth manages to cross it. But when the second wave comes, his boat is facing sideways, and he feels his stomach churn as he's*

carried several meters up into the air. Then, everything goes black.»

Create or play a secondary character

You can play a suitable supporting or secondary character at any time – either because someone asks you to, or because you feel like it. The current player can say «Do it differently», of course, which means you either change your portrayal of the character, or just play a different character. Nobody owns secondary characters – anyone can take them over at any point.

Describe events and the environment

At any time you can narrate events, describe the surroundings, et cetera.

ᔓ Ownership

Some players have *ownership of* certain elements of the fiction – such as magic, geography and culture. You decide what elements require ownership when you choose or define the setting.

> Example: When playing in the Earthsea setting, the group decided that magic, geography and culture all required ownership. You define magic as the Balance, the Pattern, dragons, Pelnish lore, witch magic, weather magic – all those things. Geography covers the map, the islands, weather, plants and animals of the Archipelago. Culture is defined as literature, music, history – and also hierarchies, societal norms and rules.

Veto

If someone narrates something that you disagree with within an element you own, you can veto their narration. This is something you can do for example if the narration contradicts existing knowledge, if it dilutes your vision of the element, or if it changes the element in a way you don't think works.

> *Example: Another player narrates how a young goatherd throws an enormous fireball at a pirate ship. You say «Veto. That just doesn't feel right. Who taught him that?»*

However, a veto isn't automatically successful. If somebody challenges it, you need the support of at least one other player – otherwise the veto has no effect.

(In a two-player game, however, the veto is automatically successful. This can be a powerful block; consider whether you want to use «Do it differently, please» instead).

> *Example: One of the players says «Why not? Fireballs are cool! I want to challenge that veto.» Another player says «No, I support the veto. No fireballs.» The veto holds.*

Note that a veto is different from saying «Do it differently, please». A veto shouldn't be used just to reflect your personal taste in narration and plot – it's meant to make sure that the integrity of the setting is intact. It's a responsibility you have toward the group.

❧ Important techniques

To make the game work, the players should understand and use the following techniques during play. These are mostly basic skills for improvisation and group storytelling.

Accept input. When someone says «such and such happens», always try to accept it into your narration. If you're not sure how to do this, start your answer with «yes, and...» and go from there.

> *Example: Someone says: «Your character trips over a rock and starts tumbling down the hill!» You answer: «Yes, and while he's rolling, his shoulder strikes a rock hard. He yells out in pain.»*

Provide input. Don't wait for other people to ask you to portray characters or describe things – just jump right in when you feel like it. Don't force it, but if you have an idea, talk first and think afterwards. Free your ass and your mind will follow, as a wise person must have said at some point.

Ask for input. If you're stuck in your narration, and just don't know exactly what to say or do, ask for input from the other players.

> *Example: You're not sure what happens after the tumble, so you say: «Um, ideas, anyone?» One of the players says: «A young man says. 'Are you hurt, master?' He helps you get up. His eyes have no irises.» Suddenly you have something to work on.*

Know when to talk and when to be quiet. Don't push it. If you feel like you have to perform, to be supersmart and creative and original, you'll probably end up with weird, stilted or clichéd narration. Better to sit back and relax, and talk when you feel like it. Remember, even when it's your turn, you don't have to do all the work.

Open your story. If you're talking all the time on your turn, providing all the detail and plot, describing all the secondary characters, and never stopping for breath – it's going to be very hard for anyone else to influence your story. Take a break, ask for input, give the other players secondary characters to play.

Avoid big time jumps. In a game like this, the characters' stories can easily get interwoven. If you then suddenly decide your next scene should take place ten years later, it can be hard for the other players to match their stories to yours. Check with the other players to see if they're okay with such jumps.

Don't steal other players' destiny points. Be very wary of this: You usually don't want other players to narrate your destiny points, nor should you usually narrate theirs. If you find yourself doing this, check with the other players if it's okay.

Keep the story about the characters. Sometimes secondary characters have a life of their own. That's okay; but if you find yourself in epic scenes where none of the main characters are active, it's time to kill your darlings – sometimes literally.