

Mermaid Game Rules

Gameplay Conventions

ACTION VS. DIALOGUE

Any given interaction is considered either primarily action (things happening), or primarily dialogue (people talking). Some dialogue will naturally occur during action scenes. We will play freely and use our judgment about which is which when needed.

2 PEOPLE TO A CONVERSATION

By default, *all conversations can only have two participants*. If you wish to engage with two people who are talking, you must get their attention and break off into a separate conversation with only one of them. That means that dialogue scenes only ever have 2 people. In a larger action scene, each person can only address one other person at a time, and may not frequently switch.

NO EAVESDROPPING

By default, you cannot stand nearby and listen in to a conversation. You are either in a conversation or out of it. In a larger action scene, it's all right to hear everything being said, even by people you are not addressing.

NO INTERVENING IN ACTION

By default, if you see an action scene unfolding, you may stand by to watch and listen, but you may not intervene until the scene is over. This reflects an atmospheric convention in which action is powerfully intimate and undemocratic. For longer action scenes, the GM may create break points in which other participants can jump in.

Character Abilities

SIGNATURE MOVES

Many characters have specific abilities which allow them to break these rules.

Action & Violence

ATTEMPTING ACTION

By default, all actions not pertaining to direct harm succeed as intended. Any action simply attempting to reverse a previous action is by default unsuccessful.

ATTEMPTING VIOLENCE

At any point that a character attempts physical harm for harm's sake upon another, the instigator should perform and describe what they are doing. Then, the player of the target character describes what happens. This reflects the atmospheric notion that violence is fundamentally volatile and unpredictable.

OTHER NOTES

Even with ability use cannot cause a character be killed without their player's consent. All verbal threats of violence are credible.

Language

THE TONGUE OF THE KINGDOM

Everyone understands and speaks the local tongue. Some are less proficient:

- The *Princess* can only speak a single sentence with at most 2 clauses at a time.
- The *Companion* can speak at most 2 sentences with 2 clauses each at a time.

THE TONGUE OF THE EMPIRE

The Princess, her Companion, the Diplomat, and surprisingly *the Sorceress* are fluent in the imperial tongue. No one else understands it.

SPEAK WITH SILENCE

An important piece of this game is the exploration of alternative forms of communication and connection. You are encouraged to use silence, eye contact, posture, facial expression, and touch.

Mermaid

Conventions of Play

Artifacts of the Fiction

USING ARTIFACTS OF THE FICTION

An *Artifact of the Fiction* is a genre convention. It is a piece of reality that, within the context of the game, all characters simply accept to be true. Clarifying artifacts allows gameplay to focus on exploring other areas. The following are the artifacts in *Mermaid*.

COMMUNICATION IS NOT TAKEN FOR GRANTED

Truly understanding one another is not easy. The alternative to communication is not miscommunication or error, but alienation, distance, and lack of empathy. This means if you are not sure what someone is saying, *do not just ask for clarification, nor jump to a conclusion*. Instead, engage with something that you do understand, and treat the rest as alien, unaccessible, and nonrelevant.

PEOPLE ARE BY DEFAULT ISOLATED

Intimacy and connection are a hunger that each person has, but also difficult to attain because people are isolated by the ways that their individual nature and circumstances are so different from one another. Attaining intimacy is a slow, intense process, but also a main focus of the game.

THERE IS NO INTIMACY WITHOUT SACRIFICE

In a sense, the game is about how much of everything else in the world— duty, attachments, ambitions, their home— each player is willing to give up in order to become close to someone.

LENIENCY & FLEXIBILITY IS RARE

External circumstances bind all of us, and most of the time we are powerless against them. The ability to grant leniency or flexibility is not a matter of casual choice, but comes with intimacy.

THINGS HAPPEN TONIGHT

If things are to be done, they will be done tonight, even though there is technically no pressure against resolving them later.

Inhabiting a Character

EMOTIONAL IMMERSION

Roleplay by immersing in and inhabiting your character's internal experience. This game is written so that you can have complete emotional immersion and continuity. In contrast to games where inhabiting a character means maintaining and advancing their strategic role, *Mermaid* will not 'break' if you spend your entire time subtly emoting with other people. But it *will* 'break' if you repeatedly tap out to be too goal-oriented.

COMPLICITY

All characters are unhappy, and all characters are complicit in each other's pain, usually because of the way that they handle their unhappiness. Innocence, complete courtesy, and flexibility are not an option. (Remember that flexibility, including flexible empathy, comes only with intimacy.) You are not here to make friends. Act from your own wounds, and be casually mean to others. Create problematic circumstances freely.

SPONTANEOUS ACTION

You are encouraged to lash out in thoughtless action, physical or social, as acts of self-expression. Be spontaneous, don't worry about consequences.

SPENDING TIME ALONE

This game is written to include plenty of cases in which the most interesting thing for a character to do is spend time alone, reflecting and dealing with their own inner world. It is also a part of the immersive continuity experience. If you are approached while spending time alone, feel free to rebuff conversation. One person watching one person think is still an action scene. If you wish to talk through your thoughts or soliloquize, feel free to grab the GM.

ENGAGE WITH STRANGERS

The conventions around isolation *do not* mean that characters should not approach or engage with strangers. Perhaps the best person to understand you is the person with whom you have nothing apparent in common.