

# At Any Cost

At Any Cost is a game of telling stories for exactly two players. It explores a hero's journey with a focus on sacrifice, travel, and coming of age.

One of the two players is the Protagonist player and plays the role of the hero: stating what their hero does and what choices they make. The other player is the Antagonist player and describes the world and all the dangerous, fantastical things in it. They may briefly take on the role of various non-player characters who appear in the hero's story, but their job in telling the story is bigger than just one character.

The Antagonist player strives to make the hero sacrifice their Anchors. The Protagonist player strives for the hero to succeed at as little cost as possible. There is conflict between the two players as the Antagonist presents challenges and the Protagonist struggles to overcome them, but this is not a game about player conflict. Both players of At Any Cost are working to create an interesting and fulfilling story.

## Contents

This game includes instructions and several decks of cards. Throughout the instructions are sidebars with detailed explanations, further tips, and suggestions. The current card set is themed as a fantasy or European fairytale version of the hero's journey. Each of the decks of cards has a different back, so they are best printed double sided.

Cards:

- 5 Stage cards
- 14 Location cards; of which 4 are marked "seed"
- 12 Anchor cards
- 40 Antagonist cards
- 32 Protagonist cards

You Will Also Need:

- Two players: one to play the Protagonist, one to play the Antagonist.
- A handful of index cards and something to write with.
- A pawn of some sort: a die, coin, or meeples will work fine.

*Credits* Fonts are Ellianarelle's Path and Constantia. Icons available on <http://game-icons.net>. "Ages," "Backpack," "Perspective dice 6 faces 6," and "Pikeman" by Delapouite. "Anchor," "Arrowed," "Brain," "Journey," "Strong," "Treasure map," and "Wing cloak" are by Lorc.

# Map Setup

Lay out the Stage cards in a row, in order from 1 through 5.

Take the Location cards marked “seed”. Shuffle them. Deal one face up below the Stage 1 card. Deal one face up below the Stage 5 card.

Take the remaining Location cards, including the unselected seed cards, and shuffle them together. Deal one face down below each of stages 2, 3, and 4. The remaining Location cards won't be used. The Stage cards and adjacent Location cards are the Map. Place a pawn on the first location.



Look up the pair of face up Location cards at Stages 1 and 5 in the list of Seed Stories. The Seed Story provides a starting point for the hero and their quest.

The Protagonist player should select a name for their hero character and write it on an index card. They may optionally describe a few further details to flesh out the story seed. Try to keep this to two or three sentences.

The Protagonist player should shuffle the Anchor cards and draw 8 of them. They then select 5 of those 8. These Anchors represent things that are important to the Protagonist's hero character. The hero will be in danger of losing these Anchors during their quest.

Answer the questions on each of the selected Anchor cards, writing the answers for each Anchor card on a separate index card. The Antagonist may ask a question or two about the Anchors to flesh them out.

# Play

At the start of each stage any cards played in the previous stage are discarded.

The Protagonist player draws 5 new Protagonist cards to add to their existing, unplayed, hand. The Antagonist draws additional Antagonist cards to add to their existing, unplayed hand. In the first stage the Antagonist draws 3 cards, 4 in the second stage, 5 in the third, 6 in the fourth, and 7 in the final stage.

Both the Protagonist and Antagonist discard down to the stage's hand limit: 3 in the first stage, 4 in the second, 5 in the third, 6 in the fourth, and 7 in the final stage. The Location card for this stage is flipped face up, if it isn't already. The pawn is moved to that location to track the hero's progress.

The Antagonist player may look at the face down locations at any time, but should not reveal location information to the Protagonist player.

The Antagonist Sets the Challenge by playing at least one card with tags matching the Location or Stage. The Antagonist narrates a threat to the Protagonist's quest based on the card or cards they played. They may also clarify the Location with a few sentences of exposition.

The Protagonist Meets the Challenge by playing one or more cards whose total value equals or exceeds to the total value of the Antagonist's cards. The Protagonist may only play cards with tags matching the current Stage, Location, or any tags on cards played by the Antagonist during the current stage. The Protagonist narrates the hero's efforts to push onward, aided by the cards they played.

The Antagonist raises the challenge by playing one or more cards. The Antagonist may only play cards with tags matching the current Stage, Location, or any tags on cards previously played by the Antagonist during the current stage. The total value of the cards played by the Antagonist this stage must exceed the total value of the Protagonist's cards.

## Matching Tags

The Protagonist and Antagonist players may only play cards that include a tag present in the current stage. At the beginning of a stage these include any tags on the current Location card and the current Stage card. There are six possible tags: Tool, Ally, Body, Mind, Soul, and Luck.

As the Antagonist plays cards any additional tags on their cards are added to the stage. For example, if the included the Mind and Soul tags, the players could play only cards that include at least one of those tags. If the Antagonist plays a card with the Mind and Luck tags both players can play cards with Mind, Soul, or Luck tags for the rest of the stage.

The Antagonist *sets* the challenges (and new tags) and the Protagonist *meets* them.

Play proceeds back and forth between the Antagonist and Protagonist players, each time comparing the total value of all cards played by each player during this Stage. Each time the Protagonist must at least match the Antagonist's total. The Antagonist must exceed the Protagonist's total.

If a player is unable or unwilling to play cards to meet or raise, they must fold. If the Antagonist folds, the Protagonist narrates the hero moving to the next stage. If the Protagonist folds, the Protagonist selects one of their Anchors and narrates the hero sacrificing that Anchor to continue onward. The Protagonist then tears up the matching index card for that Anchor. Play continues to the next stage.

If this was the fifth stage, the Protagonist should describe the successful ending of the hero's quest, and discuss how losing their Anchors changed them.

## *Sacrifice*

The Protagonist may end a stage at any point by sacrificing one of their Anchors. Sometimes they will struggle against the challenges and only just fall short. Sometimes they may be marshaling their resources for the greater battle and may choose to give something up earlier in the stage. Rarely they may be in a position where the tags available to them won't allow them to play their remaining cards.

The Protagonist's hero has enough Anchors to ensure they will always finish their quest. You are not playing to see if they succeed (they will!) but to see how the hero changes, struggles, and suffers to reach their goal.

If you feel your hero's story will be stronger with a sacrifice, make one. If you feel a sacrifice at the current stage would be anti-climactic, try to fight it out. Either way, be prepared to give up some of the things that your hero holds dear in the pursuit of a good story.

## *Narration Suggestions*

Try to leave situations and resolutions somewhat open ended. It is good for each player to specify details that interest them and enrich the story, but try to only narrate as far as you need to to advance the action of the story. Each card contains some associations and possibilities in it's description text. Lean on these when you need to or move beyond them when you feel inspired.

For example, instead of saying, "And then I sneak in and steal the sleeping dragon's treasure and flee it's lair" the Protagonist player might say "I sneak into the dragon's lair and extract the crown from it's horde while it's sleeping." This leaves the situation open so that the Antagonist player can build on the dragon's threat or move on to your journey away from it's lair.

The Antagonist player should try to avoid situations that require a very specific or immediate response. Give the Protagonist player some warning that something bad is coming ("the guards are gathering outside, they look angry" rather than "The guards burst in and grab you"). This gives the Antagonist player space to resolve situations many different ways.

If things have gotten very tangled and you aren't sure how to continue with the story, either player can consider using a flashback to something the hero or a non-player character did that changes the situation in an interesting way. Do your best to work within the framework of the story so the flashback action is consistent with the other action of the story so far.

# Story Seeds

**Farm → Place of learning:** A terrible bargain sends a farmer's child questing for the knowledge they need to escape a horrible fate.

**Farm → Ruins:** A young farmer flees from strife to seek shelter and a new home in the ruins of an ancient land.

**Farm → Mountain:** The youngest child of an impoverished farmer sets out to seek their fortune on the fabled enchanted mountain.

**Place of learning → Farm:** A young scholar searches for the last farm to grow a mystical plant. They hope to make their fortune along the way.

**Place of learning → Ruins:** The royal heir travels to ancient ruins in a distant land seeking a cure for their dying parent.

**Place of learning → Mountain:** A clever youth is framed for misbehavior and exiled to the slopes of a distant mountain. Along the way they hope to clear their name and make their fortune.

**Ruins → Farm:** After growing up in the ruins of a shattered land, the hero travels to a more prosperous country to find their love.

**Ruins → Place of learning:** After searching ancient ruins, the hero has come across information that predicts a coming catastrophe. They must hurry to bring this knowledge to the great thinkers of the royal court so that the catastrophe may be averted.

**Ruins → Mountain:** After a great catastrophe that reduced the hero's home to rubble, they are traveling to seek a wise hermit high on a mountain. They hope the hermit will give them wisdom they need to rebuild their home.

**Mountain → Farm:** The hero long ago moved to a monastery in the mountains, but they must travel home to their family farm to help avert an invasion of that peaceful land.

**Mountain → Place of learning:** The hero was born to a goatherd in a small community on the slopes of a remote mountain. All their life they've dreamed of studying in the great university and now that they are grown up they are going off to seek this dream.

**Mountain → Ruins:** The hero has escaped the clutches of an evil witch or wizard who kept them prisoner for much of their childhood in a high tower on the slopes of a mountain. They are traveling back to their homeland, only to find it in ruins.

## Incoherence

If either player narrates something that seems silly or otherwise inappropriate to the story, the other player should say so. Be generous; the nature of the game is for sudden changes to sometimes happen. The narration and card play should be rewound and retried until you reach something both players find reasonable. If you call something out as silly or inappropriate, work with the other player to help them find a better way to tell the story. Players should not strive for their goals by blocking the other player's plays.

Don't be a jerk about this just to block another player's story when you don't actually think they're being silly or inappropriate. Don't play with people who are jerks about this.

Stage  
1 Call to adventure



Antagonist draw 3.  
Protagonist draw 5  
and discard down to 3.



Stage  
2 The initial threat



Antagonist draw 4.  
Protagonist draw 5.  
Both discard down to 4.



Stage  
3 Internal conflict



Antagonist draw 5.  
Protagonist draw 5.  
Both discard down to 5.



Stage  
4 Desperate measures



Antagonist draw 6.  
Protagonist draw 5.  
Both discard down to 6.



Stage  
5 Climax



Antagonist draw 7.  
Protagonist draw 5.  
Both discard down to 7.



Location  
Farm

seed



Small, Large, Quiet,  
Busy, Family,  
Business.



Location  
Place of learning

seed



School, Library,  
Court, Apprenticeship,  
Archive.



Location  
Ruins

seed



Ancient, Recent,  
Buried, Overgrown,  
Inhabited, Abandoned.



Location  
Mountain

seed



Rugged, Worn, Cold,  
Desolate, Cave filled,  
Tree covered, Isolated.



Stage  
3 Internal conflict



Antagonist draw 5.  
Protagonist draw 5.  
Both discard down to 5.



Stage  
2 The initial threat



Antagonist draw 4.  
Protagonist draw 5.  
Both discard down to 4.



Stage  
1 Call to adventure



Antagonist draw 3.  
Protagonist draw 5  
and discard down to 3.



Stage  
5 Climax



Location

Antagonist draw 7.  
Protagonist draw 5.  
Both discard down to 7.



Stage  
4 Desperate measures



Antagonist draw 6.  
Protagonist draw 5.  
Both discard down to 6.



Location



Location



Location

Location  
City

Small. Huge.  
Abandoned. Busy.  
Trade. Lawless.  
Draconian. Stratified.  
Utopian.



Soul



Location  
Forest

Dark. Tall. Fae.  
Isolated. Wild.



Luck



Location  
Underground

Cool. Lava. Cavern.  
Mines. Dungeon. City.  
Maze-like. Lake. River.



Luck



Location  
Island

Deserted. Overgrown.  
Village. City.



Tool



Location  
Crossroads

Busy. Desolate. In the  
wilderness. In a city.  
Underground.



Ally



Location  
Ship at sea

Calm. Stormy.  
Merchant. Smugglers.  
Pirates.



Tool



Location  
Foreign land

Different customs.  
Natural wonders.  
Created wonders.  
Different economy.  
Natural dangers.



Mind



Location  
Wasteland

Isolated. Recent.  
Ancient. Desert.  
Burned. Cursed.  
Nomads. Crater.  
Poisoned.



Body



Location  
Lair

Isolated. Urban.  
Physical dangers.  
Social dangers.  
Something powerful.  
Something guarded.



Body







Location



Location



Location



Location



Location



Location



Location



Location



Location

Location  
**Holy ground**

*Created, Natural,  
Majestic, Quiet,  
Imposing, Calming,  
Joyful, Riotous.*



Soul



Protagonist  
**Arms or armor** 2



Tool

*Sword, Bow, Shield,  
Breastplate, Helm,  
Knife.*



Protagonist  
**A spell** 2



Tool

*Magic, Coincidental,  
Charms, Relics, Ritual.*



Protagonist  
**A scholar** 1



Tool



Ally

*Librarian, Doctor,  
Magician, Scribe,  
Lawyer.*



Protagonist  
**Provisions** 1



Tool



Body

*Food and water,  
Medicine, Wine.*



Protagonist  
**Map** 1



Tool

*Local insight, Possible  
dangers, Alternate  
routes.*



Mind



Protagonist  
**Relic** 1



Tool

*Magical, Ancient,  
Powerful, Useful,  
Mysterious, Respected.*



Soul



Protagonist  
**Something  
enchanted** 1



Tool

*A weapon or armor, A  
charm against evil,  
Clothing or jewelry.*



Luck



Protagonist  
**A fellow traveller** 2



Ally

*Merchant, Trader,  
Farmer, Friend,  
Soldier, Local,  
Pilgrim.*





*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Location*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*

Protagonist  
A friendly local 2



Farmer, Baker,  
Butcher, Fisher, Potter,  
Miller, Thatcher, Tinker,  
Blacksmith.



Protagonist  
An animal 2



Dog, Cat, Horse,  
Rooster, Cow, Boar,  
Deer, Songbird.



Protagonist  
A noble warrior 1



Soldier, Guard,  
Aesthetic, Knight,  
Mercenary.



Protagonist  
A clever rogue 1



Pickpocket, Burglar,  
An urchin, The most  
famous thief in the world,  
Charlatan.



Protagonist  
A holy person 1



Cleric, Priest or  
priestess, Sage,  
Hermit, Mystic, Pilgrim,  
Monk, Oracle.



Protagonist  
An old friend 1



Childhood, Comrade,  
Friendly rivalry, Fellow  
apprentice, In-law.



Protagonist  
Agile 2



Fast, Quick, Athletic,  
Nimble, Balanced.



Protagonist  
Feat of strength 2



Lifting or moving  
something,  
Overpowering someone,  
Impressing someone.



Protagonist  
Resilient 2



Strong, Tough, Fast  
recovery.





*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*

Protagonist  
**Steadfast**

1



*Trustworthy. Resolute.  
Stubborn. Faithful.*



Protagonist  
**Driven**

1



*Keeping one's resolve.  
Reaching goals through  
adversity.*



Protagonist  
**Sneaky**

1



*Quiet. Invisible.  
Concealed. Clever.  
Deceptive. Misleading.*



Protagonist  
**Worldly**

2



*Knowledgeable.  
Experienced.  
Understanding other  
cultures and customs.*



Protagonist  
**Wise**

2



*Careful. Introspective.  
Patient. Giving advice.*



Protagonist  
**Instructions**

2



*Foreknowledge. Clues.  
Avoiding traps.  
Direction. Advice.  
Previously arranged.*



Protagonist  
**Secret of the past**

2



*Foreknowledge. Buried  
secrets. Clues. Occult  
knowledge.*



Protagonist  
**Obscure knowledge**

1



*Scholarship. Hidden  
things. Occult  
knowledge. Critical  
details.*



Protagonist  
**Clever**

1



*Perceptive. Sharp.  
Turn things to your  
advantage. Misleading.  
Quick witted.*





*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*

Protagonist  
**Silver-tongued** 2

Well spoken.  
Persuasive, Misleading.



Protagonist  
**Perceptive** 2

Keen eyed, Attentive.  
Noticing traps and pitfalls.



Protagonist  
**Faith** 2

Conviction, Hope.  
Loyalty, Truth.  
Unwavering belief. At peace.



Protagonist  
**Kind** 2

Charity, Compassion.  
Gracious.



Protagonist  
**Patient** 2

Calm, Careful, Aware  
of consequences.  
Preparing, Waiting for  
the right moment.



Protagonist  
**Lucky** 1

Fate is on your side.



Antagonist  
**Self-doubt** 1

Uncertain about one's  
abilities, one's morals, or  
one's worthiness.



Antagonist  
**Temptation** 1

Safety, Wealth, Ease.  
Power, Aid for another.  
Immortality.



Antagonist  
**Greed** 1

Wealth, Power.  
Objects, Fruits of  
jealousy.







*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Protagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*

Antagonist  
An old enemy 1



A personal enemy. A nation's enemy.  
Someone you crossed on this journey.  
Socially powerful.  
Politically powerful.  
Physically powerful.



Antagonist  
Natural disaster 1



Earthquake. Tornado.  
Tsunami. Hurricane.  
Fire. Flood. Meteor.  
Sinkhole. Famine.  
Volcanic eruption.



Antagonist  
Dangerous weather 1



Thunderstorm.  
Windstorm. Tornado.  
Hurricane. Sleet.  
Drought. Unnatural weather.  
Blizzard. Sandstorm.



Antagonist  
Wild beasts 1



Wolves. Bears. Tigers.  
Lions. Boars. Magical beasts.



Antagonist  
Maze-like 1



Canyons. Caverns.  
Dungeon. Labyrinth.  
City. Warren. Huge building.  
Politics. Bureaucracy.



Antagonist  
Corrupt official 1



Greedy. Power hunger.  
Power tripping. Works for the enemy.  
Spy. Lazy. Arrogant



Antagonist  
Bandits 1



Violent. Small group.  
Troop. Ambush. Bribes law enforcement.  
Conniving. Arrogant.



Antagonist  
Riddles 1



Ancient puzzles. Test of wits.  
Trick question. Metaphorical.  
Questioning purpose.



Antagonist  
Traps 2



Physical. Social. Ancient. New. Verbal.  
Legal. Deadly. Ensnaring. Clever.  
Simple. Forgotten.





*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*

Antagonist

Something hidden 1

Lost. Forgotten.  
Hurriedly. Valuable.  
Powerful. Key.  
Knowledge.

 Luck



Antagonist

Deception 1

Untruths. Misleading.  
Self serving.  
Dangerous knowledge.  
Ends justify the means.

 Soul



Antagonist

Someone who is not  
what they seem 1

Spy. Villain.  
Transformed.  
Controlled. Charlatan.

 Soul



Antagonist

Utterior motives 1

Self interest. Greed.  
Pride. Trickery.  
Cheating. Lying.  
Self-righteous. Ends  
justify the means.

 Soul



Antagonist

Legendary creature 3

 Tool  
 Ally  
 Body  
 Mind  
 Soul  
 Luck

Dragon. Griffin.  
Mermaid. Firebird.  
Unicorn. Minotaur.  
Sphinx.



Antagonist

Dangerous  
consumables 1

 Tool

Potions. Mushrooms.  
Magical cake. Poisoned  
food.



Antagonist

Deadline 1

By a time; noon,  
midnight, dawn. In  
three days. Before the  
new moon.

 Mind



Antagonist

Illness 1

 Body

Poison. Sickness.  
Magical curse. Decline.



Antagonist

Loss of supplies 1

 Tool

No food or water.  
Broken, stolen, worn  
out, or exhausted. Tents.  
Bedrolls. Horses.





*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*

Antagonist  
Trickster

2

Anansi, Puck, Raven,  
Coyote, Loki,  
Deception, Cheating,  
Arrogance.



Mind



Luck



Antagonist  
Long distances

1

Many days travel, Wide  
spaces, Lacking  
supplies, Isolation,  
Weariness.



Body



Antagonist  
Magical barrier

2

Physical barrier, Zone  
of mental effects,  
Magical terrain or  
elemental effects.



Tool



Mind



Soul



Antagonist  
Impassible terrain

3

Cliff, River, Sea,  
Desert, Gorge, Lava,  
Maze, Thorny hedge.



Tool



Body



Mind



Soul



Antagonist  
Impossible task

3

Defeat something, Get  
or find something, Make  
something, Ordeals,  
Trials, Set by someone  
else, Something in the  
way.



Tool



Body



Mind



Soul



Antagonist  
Lost

1

Confused, Misled,  
Trapped, Isolated,  
Uncertain.



Ally



Antagonist  
Captured

1

Trapped, Imprisoned,  
Cornered, Guarded,  
Tied up, Behind bars.



Ally



Antagonist  
Ensorcelled

2

Magic, Control,  
Corrupted perceptions,  
Charmed.



Ally



Soul



Antagonist  
Great heights

1

Cliff, Rooftop, Flight,  
Bridge, Tower, Scaling  
a wall.



Body





*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*

Antagonist  
**Isolated**

2



Ally

Physical isolation. Jail.  
Lost. Stranded.  
Mental Isolation.  
Ostracised. Language  
or culture barrier.



Soul



Antagonist  
**Despair**

2



Ally

Soul-crushing.  
Gloom. Fear. Dashed  
hopes. Doubt.  
Hopelessness.



Soul



Antagonist  
**Fear**

1



Soul

Fear of an opponent  
Fear of the scope of the  
task. Fear of failure.



Antagonist  
**Endangered  
innocents**

2



Tool



Body



Mind

Endangered by the  
hero's actions.  
Threatened to  
manipulate the hero.  
Coincidentally present.



Antagonist  
**Betrayal**

2



Soul



Luck

Unexpected or  
foreshadowed. A close  
friend. Someone who  
sought aid. A merchant.  
A distant family  
member.



Antagonist  
**Limited number of  
attempts**

1



Luck

Limit set by someone  
with power. Limited by  
the environment.  
Limited by time. Dire  
consequences.



Antagonist  
**Guards**

2



Body



Mind



Soul

Corrupt.  
Well-intentioned.  
Mislead. Scared.  
Violent.



Antagonist  
**SPY**

1



Mind

Hidden. Working the  
enemy. Uses hero for  
their own ends.



Antagonist  
**Thief**

1



Mind

Pickpocket. Burglar.  
An urchin. The most  
famous thief in the world.







*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*



*Antagonist*

Antagonist  
Curse

2



Ally

Newly placed. Inherited.  
Bad luck. Illness.  
Poverty.



Soul



Luck



Anchor  
Connection to home

Where do you live?  
What do you love about  
it? What do you carry  
from there?



Anchor  
Best friend and  
companion

What is their name?  
What do you love about  
them?



Anchor  
Heirloom

What is it? What does  
it represent?



Anchor  
Confidence

Where do you draw  
your confidence from?



Anchor  
Animal companion

What is their name?  
How have they helped  
you in the past?



Anchor  
Moral code

What will you not do?  
What must you do?



Anchor  
Something beautiful

What is it? How did you  
come to have it?



Anchor  
A token from your love

What is it? Who gave  
it to you?





*Anchor*



*Anchor*



*Antagonist*



*Anchor*



*Anchor*



*Anchor*



*Anchor*



*Anchor*



*Anchor*

*Anchor*  
**Respect**

Who respects you?  
Why?



*Anchor*  
**Dignity**

What have you never  
had to do?



*Anchor*  
**Youth**

How is your youth  
evident to others? Why  
do you fear age?



*Anchor*  
**Health and well-being**

What do you treasure  
most about your health  
and well-being?





*Anchor*



*Anchor*



*Anchor*



*Anchor*