

Arsenic & Lies – how to play online

It is 31 December 1919 and the party at Weatherby Manor is in full swing. The guests exchange furtive whispers of intrigue, blackmail and forbidden love. At midnight, a glass of poisoned champagne shatters, dropped from a dying hand. The family has to find – or frame – the killer before the police start looking too closely into their secrets.

www.arsenicandlies.com

Due to coronavirus it is currently impossible for most of us to organise chamber larp events in physical space, so I decided to create an online version of Arsenic & Lies in the hope that it could help someone get their larping fix. The larp is very much designed to be played offline, and the video chat aspect wouldn't be diegetic (i.e. within the fiction the characters would be interacting in physical space, not over video chat), but if we can pretend we're in a 1920s upper class mansion while in reality we're in someone's modern-day living room, theoretically we could also pretend we're in the same room even if we're not. I make no claims the larp is well-suited to the digital medium, but if you think it might work for your group, feel free to give it a spin. Here's how to do it.

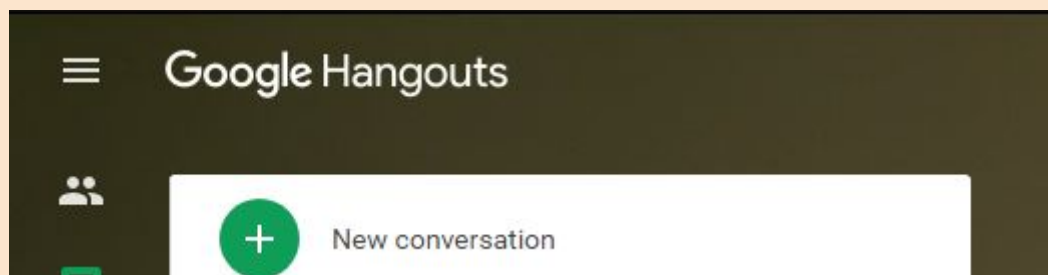
First, you should decide as a group whether you want to play the game as a larp or a tabletop RPG. The larp version will work for groups of 5-8 people (the physical game can work up to 10 players, but sadly Tabletopia, the platform I am using to handle the card manipulation aspect of the game, allows 8 players at most), while the tabletop RPG version is better suited to groups of 3-6 players. In the following guide I assume you will be playing A&L as a larp; the changes you need to make to play A&L as an RPG are described in the final section of the document.

While the game is still GM-less, one person will need to do slightly more work when it comes to setting up the tech side of things – I'll call them the host.

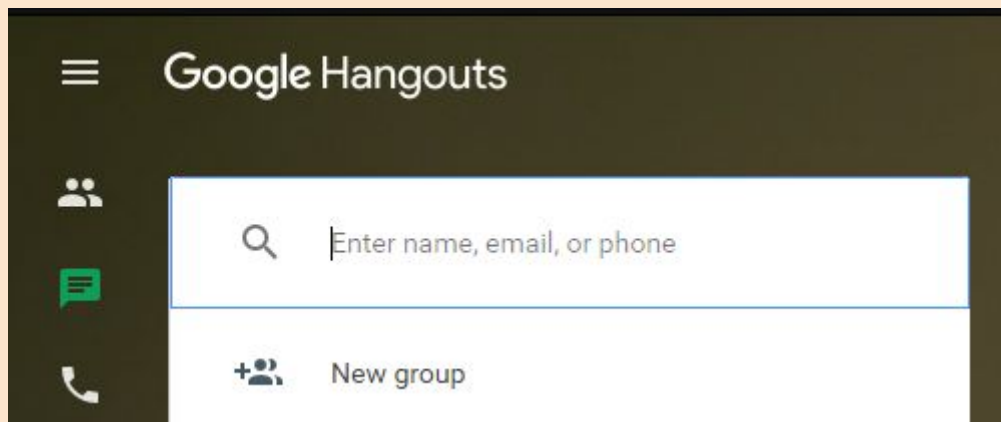
1. (host) Make sure you're familiar with the [rules for the original game](#).
2. (host) Set up 5 separate Google Hangouts video chats accessible via links and share these links with the players (note: you can use another video chat platform, if you prefer, as long as it is capable of letting people easily switch between several simultaneous video conversations).

Here are the steps assuming you use Hangouts:

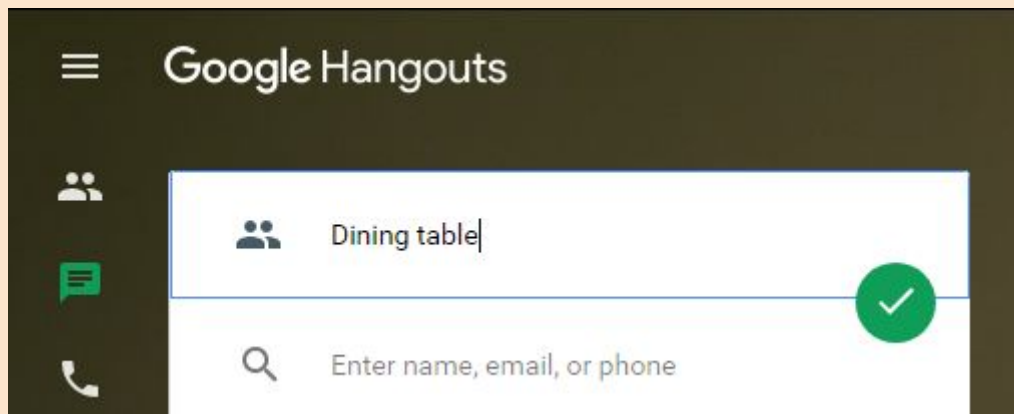
- a. Go to <https://hangouts.google.com/> (the host will need to set up a Google account to do this, but the guests won't need to have accounts) and click the "New conversation" button in the top-left corner of the screen.



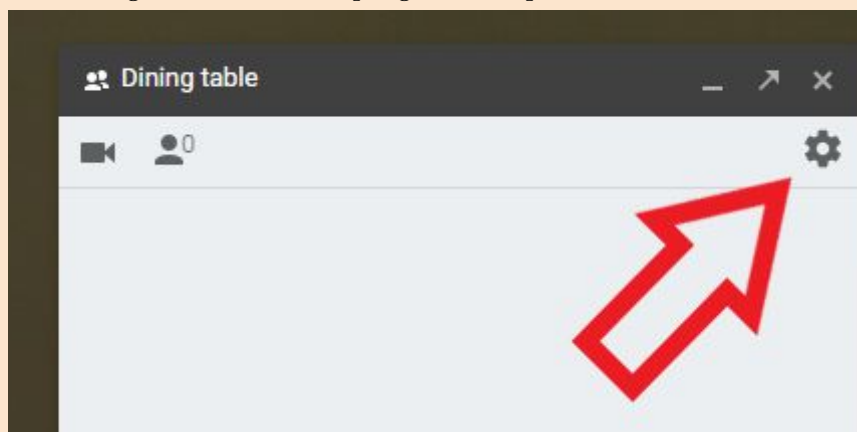
- b. Now, click the “New group” button:



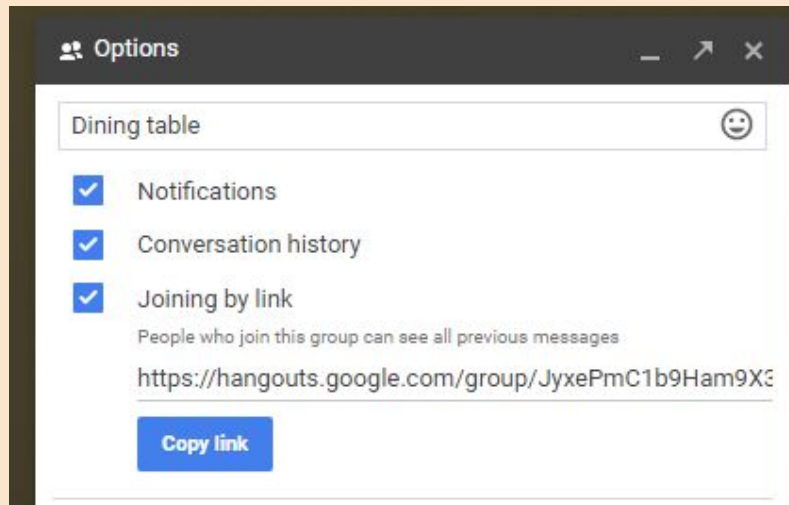
- c. In the “Name your group (optional)” field enter “Dining Table” and click the green checkmark button to confirm:



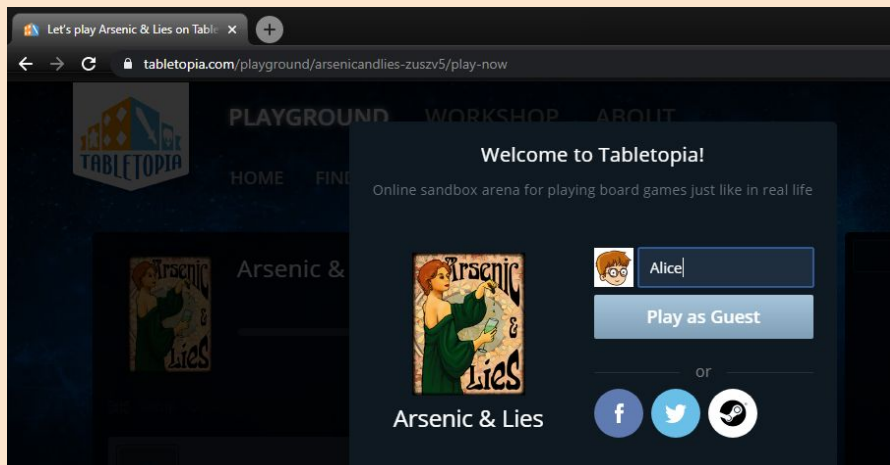
- d. A panel with the newly created conversation should appear on the right of your screen. Click the gear icon in the top-right of the panel.



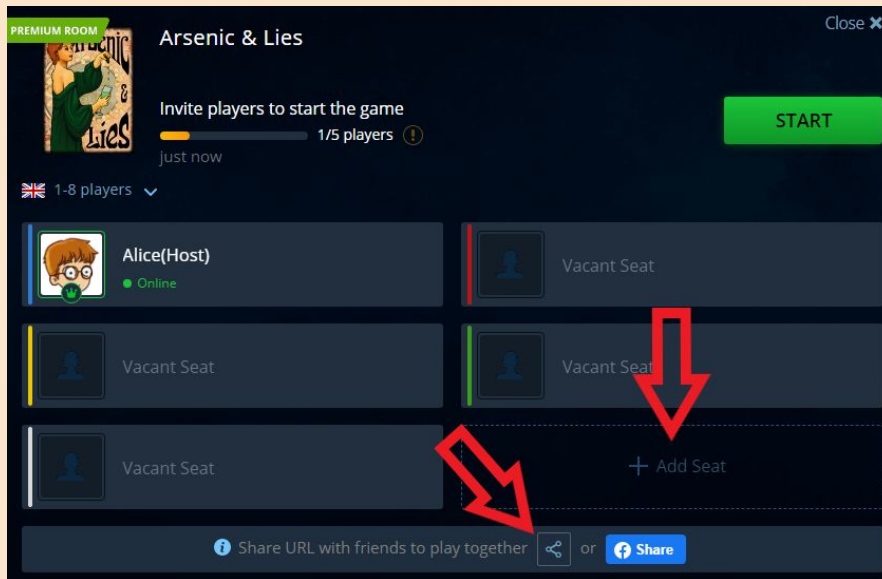
- e. In the option panel that appears, check the “Joining by link” checkbox and copy the generated link to a separate document (or an email) labelled with “Dining table”.



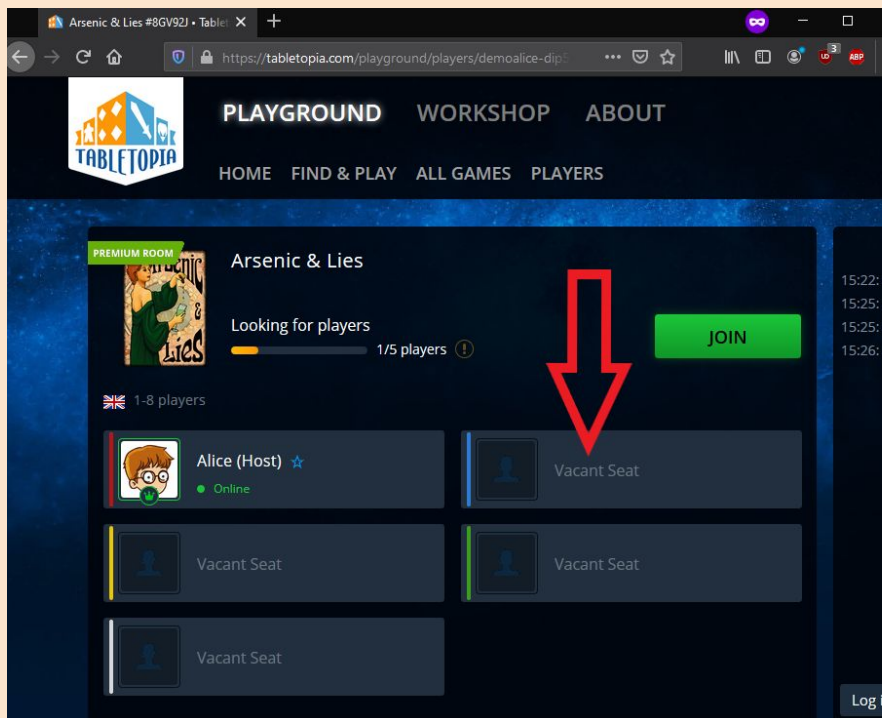
- f. Repeat these steps to create 4 more named conversations: “Portrait gallery”, “Cocktail bar”, “Orangery” and “Smoking room”.
- g. Share the links to all 5 conversations with the players via an email or a shared document. The players should have these links readily accessible while playing the game, labelled with which play area they represent.
- h. You can invite the players to join all these conversations now, and start the video chat (by clicking the camera icon on top of the conversation panel) for the Dining table conversation – you can use this chat to explain the larp to the players, lead them through the setup and conduct the workshop.
3. (host) Set up an Arsenic & Lies room on Tabletopia by clicking [this link](#) and selecting Play as Guest.



- (host) Add an appropriate number of vacant seats to the room, one per player. After you're done, you can share the link to the room with the other players by clicking the share button.



- (everyone) When you receive the link from the host, click on one of the vacant seats to join:



- (everyone) When everyone is ready, the host should press Start to start the game. It might take a couple of minutes to load. After it has loaded, it will offer you a quick tutorial to the Tabletopia user interface, which might be helpful but isn't strictly necessary (I will cover the main points in this guide). After you have followed it or skipped it, you should see the game setup looking roughly like this:



You can adjust the camera angle by right clicking and dragging, pan the view by clicking on the table surface and dragging, and zoom with the mouse wheel.

7. (host) In the top-left corner, there is a stack of face-down News cards. These cards are used to randomise who the killer will be, but they require some setup depending on the player number. Initially, there are 8 cards in the News deck. If you have fewer than 8 players including yourself, you will need to remove some cards from this deck by drag-and-dropping them to the side. In the final deck, you want to have one card per player. Remember to do this **before** you shuffle the cards (described in the next step) – the “You Are The Killer” card is initially on the bottom of the deck and you wouldn’t want to accidentally remove it.



8. (host) After you’ve done that, right click on the News deck and press the shuffle icon. You should also shuffle the Relationship deck and the Secrets deck.



9. (everyone) Draw one Secret and one Relationship card to your hand. You do that by clicking on top of the respective deck and dragging the card to the very bottom of the screen. You will know that you’re doing it correctly when the bottom of the screen gets highlighted in your player colour – you can now release the card and it will be added to your hand.



10. In order to read your card, you will need to **enlarge it by hovering your mouse over it and pressing space**. If you don't like a card you've drawn, just draw another card from the same deck until you're satisfied. Optionally, if you want to return a card so that the other players can use it, flip it in your hand by pressing F, drag it back to the deck it came from and shuffle that deck.
11. (everyone) When the workshop reaches the character-choosing stage, choose a character by dragging a card to a space marked with your colour on top of the screen. Note: the cards are double-sided, with a different gender on each side of the card (**press F while hovering over a card to flip**).



12. (everyone) When prompted by the original instructions, draw one News card each, like you did in step 10., to secretly determine who will be the killer.
13. (host) Instead of playing the soundtrack you should just set a timer to pace the game, since background music could be too distracting for online play.
14. (everyone) Switch to Google Hangouts and start larping. You can start with everyone in the Dining Table video chat, but you should soon form smaller groups in different video chats in the way described below. If you want to have a private conversation with another character, you can just ask them to follow you to another room, and then both players would leave their current video chat and join the other chat. Important: if you're using Google Hangouts, **only leave the video chat** (by closing the popup window with the chat, **not the text chat conversation** – if you leave the conversation, it will be problematic to return). E.g. “Lady Beatrice, would you like to take a stroll with me in the orangery?” After that conversation is over, both players should come back to the Dining Table – this video chat should act as a central hub where people return to to seek play. If you are looking to have a conversation with a particular character who isn't there, you can wait for them or try looking for them in other rooms.
15. (everyone) If it is appropriate for the scene, you can simulate physical interaction by miming the motion towards the camera, e.g. caressing someone's face or punching someone.
16. (killer) During the first act, the Killer should briefly switch back to Tabletopia to drag the poison token, which is initially positioned to the left of the selected character cards, under the card of the character they intend to poison. You should do it much like you would in the physical version of the game: drag the selected character card to the side, drag the poison token to the place where the card used to be, and replace the character card over it.
17. (everyone) When the timer for the first act runs out, you should switch back to Tabletopia to check whether your character got poisoned – just drag your character card aside to see whether there is a poison token underneath.

RPG variant

If you're 3-4 players, you can still play Arsenic & Lies as a GM-less tabletop RPG (this should also work for groups of 5-6 players). You should follow the regular workshop instructions, creating one character each, with the following changes:

- All relationships, especially the card-prompted Relationships, should be discussed openly and quite briefly.
- The Secret cards can stay mostly secret, though some elements of the secret can be discussed openly with other players if necessary.
- The identity of the killer remains secret.
- Depending on the number of players, you might need to create a couple of secondary characters to pad up the cast (there should be at least 5-6 characters present in the fiction). After everyone has introduced their main characters, you can request the addition of secondary characters, especially if your Relationship/Secret is incompatible with any existing character (“I’d really like to have a suitor”, “I’d like someone who has been in the war with me” etc.). Another player should pick it up as a side character they will play, and define it a bit further.

The gameplay will follow the same structure as the larp, with the following changes:

- The players will take turns framing scenes, as in any other indie RPG (“My main character, lord A, talks with your main character, lady B, about their affair in a secluded alcove, at some point Bob’s secondary character, duke C, walks into their conversation”). If the players so desire, the scenes might also be flashbacks (“Flashback: let’s see how exactly lord X betrayed lord Y during the war”).
- If playing online, the poisoning can be performed exactly like in the online larp version described above. If playing face-to-face, an additional procedure is needed to preserve the secrecy of who the killer is. Right before the midnight toast scene, one of the players should lead the group through the following instructions: “Everyone, close your eyes. Killer, open your eyes. Killer, place the poison token under the character card of your choice. Killer, close your eyes. Everyone, open your eyes.”

I hope you have fun trying out this online version of Arsenic & Lies! If you enjoy the experience, I’d appreciate it if you sent me a pound or two to [my PayPal](#). Thanks!