



PANTHEON

A STORYTELLING GAME OF GODS AND HEROES

ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα
πολλὰ πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον
ἔπερσεν: πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ
νόον ἔγνω, πολλὰ δ' ὃ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα
ὄν κατὰ θυμόν, ἅρνύμενος ἣν τε ψυχὴν καὶ
νόστον ἑταίρων.

*Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices,
who wandered full many ways after he had
sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. Many were
the men whose cities he saw and whose mind he
learned, aye, and many the woes he suffered in
his heart upon the sea, seeking to win his own
life and the return of his comrades.*

Translation by A.T. Murray, 1919

PANTHEON

Written by Colin Fredericks as part of National Game Design Month, November 2011.

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INTRODUCTION

Pantheon is a game about a hero's journey, and the trials devised by the gods.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

You will need at least one six-sided die, preferably one for each player. You will also need two sets of different-colored counters, which are referred to as “chips” in the game. We recommend poker chips. Each player will have a stack of chips, with extras in a communal pot.

You will need at least three players. One person plays the *Hero*. At least two people play the *Gods*. If there are four or more people, one can play the *Companion*.

THE BASICS

The *Hero* is engaged in an *Ordeal*. *Ordeals* typically involve dangerous journeys and choices to be made. This *Ordeal* is of importance to the *Gods* in some manner, but they cannot take it up themselves. Only the *Hero* is capable of resolving the *Ordeal*.

The *Gods* are powerful, and can take steps to alter the world in ways that are within their *Purview*. They may call storms, raise

up monsters, cause famine, shower one with wealth, or send inspiration to mortals in dreams or visions. They can also appear within the world in various forms, called Avatars, attempting to convince the *Hero* to make certain choices or take certain actions.

Various *Companions* accompany the *Hero* throughout the *Ordeal*. Sometime there is a single *Companion*; sometimes *Companions* come and go. *Companions* offer their advice to the *Hero*, recommending one path or another.

The *Hero* retains free will throughout the *Ordeal*, but may be influenced in mind or deed by one *God* or another, back and forth, as the game progresses. Each *God* has a goal, hidden, that the *Hero* may help to achieve.



Theseus battles the Minotaur

THE HERO

- You are the protagonist.
- You cannot be removed from the story.
- You may describe your own efforts, but not their effects.
- You may defy the wishes of the *Gods*.
- You must have a public goal, written for all to see.
- You begin with a stack of ten Hubris chips, and will gain and lose them as the story continues.



Atalanta wrestles Perseus

THE COMPANION

- You portray one or many characters who accompany the *Hero*. These characters are typically protagonists.
- Individual companions may be removed from the story, but you continue playing, portraying others who take their place.
- You begin with a stack of Grace chips, one per player, and will gain and lose them as the story continues.
- If there is no *Companion*, distribute one Grace chip to each player.
- *Companions* do not have written Goals in the game, though they may still have their own hopes and desires.



Iolaus (left), companion to Heracles (right),
with the god Eros between them

THE GODS

- You portray one of the *Gods* of Olympus.
- You have a particular Goal, which the only the *Hero* may achieve, though it may involve the *Hero's* downfall. You must write this goal down. You may make the goal public or keep it secret if you wish, but cannot show the writing to others.
- You seek to lead the *Hero* to a particular fate and oppose the Goals of other *Gods*.
- You command certain facets of the world – your *Purview* – and may describe events related to them.
- You cannot be removed from the story.



Apollo and Artemis

OTHER CHARACTERS

Characters who appear in the *Ordeal* who are not the *Hero*, the *Companion*, or the *Gods* are most often sent or inspired by the *Gods*. As such, their actions and words are described by the *Gods* for the time that they remain in the story, which is typically not long.

On occasion the *Hero* may also seek out individuals of renown and importance, to ask their advice or assistance. These people are portrayed by the *Companion*.

Characters who do not fall into one of those two categories are typically unimportant to the story. Their presence should be glossed over.

PRELIMINARIES

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

As the game begins, the players pick their roles.

The *Hero* states his or her goal. The *Hero* must tell the truth as it stands at the beginning of the game – the goal may change later, but the *Hero* truly desires it at this time and will be motivated by it.

The *Gods* describe their *Purview* – three areas under their authority. *Gods* must write down their goals. They may state them if they desire, but need not tell the truth.

The *Companion* player states who accompanies the *Hero*, and why, and affirms his or her loyalty to the *Hero*.

Some amount of negotiation is expected in the selection of roles, and in the choice of gods. This should happen before the roles are stated out loud.

Goals as written down should not be vague, and should always involve the *Hero*. There should be no uncertainty as to whether a Goal has been achieved.

We use as our primary example Homer's Odyssey.

The Hero: Odysseus

"I am Odysseus of Ithica. I seek to return home to my wife."

The Companion: Odysseus' men

"We are Odysseus' men, sailors all. We seek to return home safely with our wise and honored leader."

(Later in the game the Companion would portray Odysseus' wife Penelope. However, this need not be mentioned at this time.)

The Gods:

Poseidon: "I am the God Poseidon, lord of the sea, horses, and wrath. I seek to challenge those who would sail my seas."

Athena: "I am Athena, goddess of wisdom, weaving, and cities. I seek to return my faithful servant Odysseus to his proper place in life."

Aphrodite: "I am Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty, and pleasure. I seek to unite people in love."

THE OPENING SCENE

Once roles are chosen, the players set the scene, acting in character. Antagonism between one of the *Gods* and the *Hero* is expected at this time, but not required – some stories begin more quietly. Antagonism and suspicion between the *Gods* themselves is likewise expected.

Each player must speak at least once during the opening scene.

Odysseus: “Men, let us leave these lands and return to our homes. All this warring has left me sick to my stomach. My wife no doubt misses me as I do her. What say you?”

Odysseus’ Men: “Indeed, captain! Bring us home to our houses and our children. Troy’s a lousy place anyway.”

Poseidon: “What is this? Sailors set forth without proper prayer to I, king of the seas? I’ll have none of this.”

Athena: “Come, Poseidon, leave Odysseus alone. He is one of my favored; I appreciate his wisdom.”

Aphrodite: “And he seeks to return home to his wife – and his sailors to their varied women. What nobler cause could there be?”

Poseidon: "Nobility has little to do with forgetting the proper sacrifices."

Athena: "We have clashed before, uncle. Do not try me again."

Poseidon: "Perhaps it is time for a rematch."



Poseidon and Athena compete
for the city of Athens

THE GAME CYCLE

Once those preliminaries are completed, game play proceeds in a cycle with four phases:

Declamation, Roll, Reaction, and Transition

The Declamation is a formal description of the actions or intentions of all involved. Players Roll to determine the results of such actions. After the roll a period of in-character Reaction is required, followed by the *Hero's* Transition to the next major point of the story, when a new set of Declamations are made.

THE DECLAMATION

In the Declamation phase, the *Gods* describe what they will do to turn the *Hero's* path. They state this in a formal, almost ritualistic manner, codifying their comments from the React and Transition phases.

Actions that present challenges to the *Hero's* welfare are declaimed first. So long as there are any Hubris chips remaining, the *Hero's* welfare must be challenged each turn. If the *Hero* has no Hubris chips remaining, his or her welfare cannot be challenged in the declamation.

The declamations of the **Gods** may not duplicate each other. This should be settled during conversation in the Transition, before the Declamation phase. The **Hero** or **Companion** may choose to align their declamations with one of the **Gods**, but need not do so.

We will skip ahead in the story, to a time after Odysseus and his men have left the island of the enchantress Circe and seek to continue their voyage through dangerous waters. Poseidon boasted during the Transition of his sirens, who would tempt Odysseus to his doom. The sirens are now before them.

Poseidon: "I will present Odysseus with the Sirens, whose singing calls sailors to their death."

Aphrodite: "I will give the Sirens voices of such beauty that Odysseus and his men shall seek to hear them and join with them eternally."

Athena: "I will inspire Circe, who will speak with Odysseus and entreat him to plug his men's ears and his own, that he may not hear the Sirens."

The Hero and Companion react to the challenges presented by the Gods.

Odysseus: "I heed the words of Circe, but I wish to hear the beautiful voice of the Sirens. Plug the men's ears, but bind me to the mast."

Odysseus' Men: "Odysseus! Hear the words of Athena and save us from the Sirens! We wish to return home!"

THE ROLL

Each player except for the *Companion* rolls a single six-sided die. Each chip spent on behalf of a particular player adds +1 to the roll. The highest roll wins, and the events described in the winner's declamation are enacted.

GRACE:

Before the roll itself is made, any players with Grace chips may spend them to improve their own roll or another player's roll. Players may spend no more than two chips at a time.

Spent Grace chips must be redistributed to players who neither spent them nor benefited from them. They should be distributed as evenly as possible.

Players cannot go more than one turn without spending Grace chips, unless they have none.

The *Companion* does not roll, but must spend at least one Grace chip each turn.

After the roll is completed, the *Companion* gains one Grace chip from the pot.

HUBRIS:

If the *Hero* wins the roll, add one chip to the *Hero's* Hubris pile.

At least one point of Hubris must be spent each turn by one of the two methods below. It matters not who spends it or how, but at least one God or the Hero must attempt to reduce the amount of Hubris in the game. The approach to be taken is best laid out during Transition, when the Gods may speak of punishing the Hero, or the Hero may speak of following the wishes of the Gods for a time.

Any *God* may spend just one Hubris chip from the *Hero's* pile to add +1 to their own roll if that *God's* declamation is phrased in one of the following manners:

- preying upon the *Hero's* sense of vanity, authority, rightness, or importance,
- as vengeance for the *Hero's* misdeeds,
- or as punishment for the *Hero's* lack of piety.

If the *God* loses the roll, the chip is returned to the Hubris pile. If that *God* wins the roll, the Hubris chip instead turns into a Grace chip and is added to the *God's* pile. *Gods* who take advantage of this rule may not spend Grace

points on themselves for the same roll.

If the *Hero* acts in a manner that is consistent with a *God's* Declamation, he or she may spend one Hubris chip to add +1 to that *God's* roll. If that *God* loses the roll, the chip is returned to the *Hero's* Hubris pile. If that *God* wins the roll, the Hubris chip instead turns into a Grace chip and is added to the *God's* pile.

*Her*os without Hubris chips receive a +1 to their die rolls. This naturally leads to a Hubris gain sooner rather than later.

In our example, Odysseus uses a Hubris chip for Athena, and the Companion spends a Grace chip for her. At this time Odysseus, Poseidon, Athena, and Aphrodite roll.

Athena has a +2 bonus from the chips spent by the Companion and Odysseus. In this case, Odysseus wins the roll.

Odysseus adds one chip to his Hubris pile. Athena distributes her chips, giving one each to Poseidon and Aphrodite. Poseidon, with the least number of chips, returns his to the pot, and the Companion picks it up.

Odysseus has become the only man to ever hear the Sirens and live.

HOW THE MECHANICS WORK

Grace chips will flow back and forth between the players, giving an advantage to one or another as the game progresses. The goal of including them was to create an environment where different players will succeed at different times, back and forth, but without complete randomness.

Hubris chips are a “timer” for the game, a pacing mechanism. They should disappear at a slow but fairly reliable rate, allowing the players to know when the game is likely to be near its end. *Heroes* without Hubris are unassailable, and receive a bonus on all their rolls. This lucky state is by its nature unlikely to continue, but speeds the game toward its conclusion.



THE REACTION

In this phase the *Gods* speak amongst each other as if on Mount Olympus. Colloquial language is expected. Smack-talking and monologuing are encouraged.

The *Hero* and *Companion* may converse, passing forward into the Transition phase. Praising or cursing the *Gods* is acceptable. Alternatively, either or both may take on the voice of other *Gods* and add to the conversation. For instance, Ares or Zeus might stumble upon the conversation and speak their minds.

No actions are taken during the Reaction, save for blustering, raging, and crowing.

Athena: "Ha! In your face, Poseidon!"

Poseidon: "You are a sore winner, Athena. I'll best this man yet. There's a lot of sea to cross before he gets home."

Aphrodite: "How rude of both of you. When he could have had all that the immortal Sirens could have given him..."

Athena: "Oh, yeah, and drowned in the process. My boy's no chump."

Poseidon: "We'll see about that."

THE TRANSITION

In this phase the *Hero* moves from the last challenge to the next. This is typically the longest phase. It is driven primarily by the *Hero's* actions, the results of the Roll, and the dictates of the *Gods*.

Gods may act within their *Purview* to respond to the actions of the *Hero* and the *Companion*. If there is a direct conflict between the statements of two *Gods*, the tie will be broken by the will of another *God*, or, if not, then by the *Companion*.

The Transition may be a time of ease or of difficulty, but not a time of serious hazard. When a hazard arises, the stage is set for the next Declamation, which will resolve it. If there is a question about whether one of the *Gods* intends for a hazard to arise, that *God* is the arbiter.

According to the roll, Odysseus escapes the sirens, and continues across the sea.

Odysseus: "Keep sailing, men. The six-headed monster and the whirlpool lie still before us."

Companion: "I'm not really sure I like that. Isn't there some way we can avoid this? Perhaps we

can travel by land?”

Poseidon: “Oh, no. There’ll be none of that. My currents will keep them at sea no matter how they turn.”

Athena: “Crafty Odysseus might find a way to shore.”

Aphrodite: “Crafty he may be, but he’s not known for his skill as a sailor. I fear he will remain at sea with his men as long as Poseidon wills it.”

Athena: “Damn.”

Odysseus’ Men: “Yes, damn these currents! Who are you talking to? What? Nothing.”

Odysseus: “No matter. Keep her steady, men – the fastest way home is over the sea.”

Odysseus’ Men: “It sounds like a very dangerous route.”

Poseidon: “Oh, it is.”

Athena: “You’re all talk, uncle. Odysseus will sail straight through both Scylla and Charybdis, just you wait and see.”

Poseidon: “Really? You want to see?”

Aphrodite: "Oh I hate all this talk of danger and death."

Poseidon: "Don't worry, it'll all be over soon. I so declare it"

From then, the cycle repeats with the declamation.

Poseidon: "I will enrage the great whirlpool Charybdis. It will devour Odysseus' ship."

Aphrodite: "And I will calm the savage Scylla, who will let Odysseus pass."

Athena: "My advice flows again from Circe – Odysseus will sail by Scylla, losing men but allowing his ship to survive."

Odysseus: "This time I keep to the wisdom of Circe. We will take the cliff-side path."

Companion: "Oh, let Aphrodite's grace prevail!"

ENDING THE GAME

It is a rule that neither the *Hero* nor the *Gods* may be removed from the game. Should the *Hero* be killed, his or her *Ordeal* continues even into the underworld or the next life. The true point of the game is the completion of one's goals.

When the *Hero's* Hubris is reduced to zero, consider whether any of the players' Goals are met. If they are, the Reaction and Transition phases bring the game to a conclusion. Players utter a final Declamation that describes their acts into perpetuity, and events come to a close.

CHANGING GOALS:

It may be that the players' Goals need to change as the game progresses. For instance, were Odysseus to be drowned in the whirlpool Charybdis, his chance of returning to his wife's arms would be effectively nil. He would be a shade in Hades. However, even in Hades he might hope to reach the blessed island of Elysium and wait for Penelope there. Alternatively, he might visit her as a ghost, discover her many suitors, and seek to drive the majority of them from his home.

Goals are changed during the Transition phase.

Heroes who have no *Hubris* cannot change their *Goals*.

Because the goals of the *Gods* are secret, it is possible that they may be met earlier in the game. For instance, Zeus or Aphrodite may seek to bed the *Hero*, and few would refuse them. Any *God* whose Goal is met may reveal that Goal during the Reaction phase and write a new one during the Transition phase. Alternatively, a *God* whose Goal is met may decide to step out of the game, and be replaced by a new deity portrayed by the same player.



The apotheosis of Heracles

ADVICE

GODLY PURVIEWS

A *God's Purview* is a set of concepts or phenomena that the *God* has sovereignty over. In the Transition and Declamation phases that *God's* actions are guided by his or her *Purview*. Here are some examples from the Greek pantheon.

- Zeus: Thunder, Weather, Prophecy, Manhood, Virility, Lust
- Hera: Marriage, Strength, Family, Womanhood, Birth
- Poseidon: The Sea, Earthquakes, Anger, Weather, Horses
- Demeter: Nature, Earth, Plants, Harvest, Bounty, Fertility
- Hades: Death, the Underworld, Stone, Wealth, Gloom
- Hestia: The Home, the Hearth, Comfort, Virginitv, Gentleness
- Apollo: The Sun, Medicine, Archery, Music, Prophecy, Plague
- Artemis: The Moon, Archery, Hunting, Virginitv, Animals, Vengeance
- Athena: Wisdom, War, Justice, Weaving, Cities (esp. Athens)

- Ares: War, Anger, Strength, Machismo
- Aphrodite: Beauty, Love, Emotion, Pleasure, Lust
- Hephaestus: Fire, The Forge, Volcanoes, Invention, Cripples
- Dionysus: Revelry, Dance, Madness, Wine, Theater
- Hermes: Travel, Messengers, Magic, Shepherds, Crossroads, Thieves

Certain actions are accessible to all *Gods*, such as walking the earth in mortal form, sending omens by one means or another, inspiring emotions, and whatever else the *Gods* as a whole agree upon.

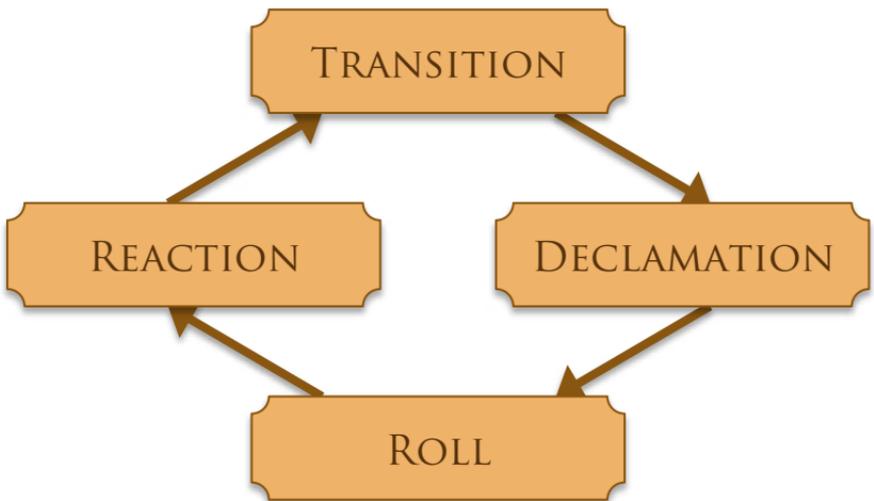
ADAPTING THE SETTING

The game as written deals with mythic Greece, but can easily be adapted to other mythologies. Any mythos in which a major character is buffeted by fate and the gods is an excellent fit. Stories such as the Ramayana and the Epic of Gilgamesh are good examples.

GAME CYCLE

IN TRANSITION:

- HERO ACTS, GODS RESPOND.
- GODS SET UP FOR THE DECLAMATION
- SET NEW GOALS IF NEEDED



IN THE ROLL:

- EACH PLAYER ROLLS ONE DIE
- ADD SPENT GRACE (UP TO 2) AND HUBRIS (MUST SPEND 1), HIGHEST ROLL WINS.
- CANNOT HOARD GRACE
- SPENT GRACE IS REDISTRIBUTED
- HUBRIS SUCCESSFULLY SPENT IS LOST.
- HERO GAINS HUBRIS WHEN ROLL SUCCEEDS.
- COMPANION DOES NOT ROLL, MUST SPEND GRACE, RECEIVES ONE GRACE AFTER ROLL.