

Monotheism

A game of cosmic struggle between rival deities

Introduction

A group of Gods has created a new cosmos, an infinite expanse. Or perhaps they merely found it, exploited it, and molded it to their own ends. Perhaps it summoned them into being as an expression of itself. It doesn't matter.

They are there, and they are hardly perfect beings – they exist through the actions of their followers, increasing in power as they do their Lord's willing and suffering writhing, physical pain as their followers thwart and subvert them.

Eventually, they will succumb to this pain, becoming bestial formless beings that live to harm others, dragging the whole world down with them.

What you do

In this game you individually play the roles of Deities and narrate the results of their actions on the world. You also compete with the other players to be the last Deity standing, as the others are undone by their Pain and become formless Ethoses. Finally, you direct the actions of your followers as they go out and act in the world.

This game does not support free ranging campaign play, and should be completed in the course of a long evening or two. Its focus is clearly on deities and their followers, not the specific details of the universe they inhabit, which may freely be narrated by the players as they wish without any effect of the game's action except as it affects the players' conceptions.

There is also no final authority of play. Disputes are generally resolved by uninvolved players, defined as any player who is currently not acting or being targeted by the action under dispute.

Preparing to Play

What You Need to Play

Index cards

Red, black and blue pens for each player

Lots of multi-sided dice in red, black, and blue colors. They do not need to be perfectly distributed, indeed it adds tension if they are not. They should come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Perhaps 20 black and blue dice and 30 red should do for a group of four or five.

Becoming a Deity

Each player portrays the role of a deity. They have only two essential characteristics: Pain and Affirmation. Their Followers cause them pain and affirm them by acting in specific ways.

All you need to do during character creation is to define what makes your deity feel pain and what affirms them. You should discuss this with your fellow players and suggest some examples of specific things that would affirm and pain them when done by their followers. You're not going to wiggle out of the bad stuff by choosing carefully, so you might as well choose something interesting that your followers can exult in or be amusingly corrupted by.

It should also be a result and not a process. Victory is better than Battle, for example. Of course, there is plenty of wiggle room, and choosing Battle would not ruin the game. And many excellent Traits, such as Love, are processes and results at the same time.

Getting Ready

The dice must be divided. Dice with more sides are more powerful, more useful for a deity, but dangerous for a mortal. A good selection is invaluable. Simply, each player in turn selects one die of their choice from the Pool until no dice remain. If some players get more dice than others in this way, that's OK.

Different colored dice represent different themes in the game. Black dice represent reality and are used to create Followers and change them fundamentally. For example, you could use black dice to create a new character – or to kill another. Blue dice are Affirmations of their deity's fundamental values. Red dice represent Pain, and are used to bring pain to other deities.

All Divine Pools (individual player dice pools) must be visible to other players at all times. Alternately, you could easily change this rule to allow secret pools.

Starting the Game

The player who first introduced this game to the group begins by rolling single black die.

They then describe the creation or revelation of some Follower of the Deity. You could do this in a biblical way ("In the beginning, there was light"), or simply by describing a person or culture. A Follower may be a planet, a group, a culture, or a person - perhaps even something else.

When you create a Follower you write down a number of Traits on the card equal to the value rolled. Traits might be adjectives, possessions, attitudes, or connections. Connections are a special type of Trait and are described later. When you finish writing Traits, increment the Reality, Pain, or Affirmation of the Follower by the number of its Traits of that type. Finally, increase your Divine Pain and Affirmation by the number of Traits

Each player going to the left then does the same until it is the turn of the original starting player again. Depending on their feeling, they might declare a second free round, where no player can modify or subvert the creations of other players.

There is no provision for other players to alter or edit the provisions of other players at this stage. Each deity works their will on the world unchallenged. This round of Turns is called the Free Round.

Followers

Followers represent mortal followers and worshippers of the acting Divinity. Angels, Avatars and the like are considered direct agents of their divinity in this game and are not treated separately from them. That means they are not appropriate Followers, which perhaps is a weakness in the game.

Followers should have a name, but this is not treated as a Trait. On their card, you should write their Reality (Total Black traits), Pain (total Red Traits), and Affirmation (total Blue Traits). Like this: 9/5/7

Traits

Traits can represent a wide variety of things, from personal attitudes to skills and possessions. There is an art to Trait selection, but you should strive to make them both broad and specific. A good vocabulary can help you here, but keep in mind that their applicability will be interpreted by other players who may not have your best interests at heart, and they are encouraged to be strict if you have too many overly broad traits. Specific, clear Traits help protect you from such a situation.

Additional Free Rounds

The First Mover (simply a title for the starting player) might choose, with player agreement, to set some basic restrictions on play during the free and clear round. For example, they might declare that play should begin with one round of peoples (in the sense of cultures), then one round of avatars (or perhaps prophets), finally finishing with a round of unchallenged Affirmations. Such a structure might be useful and interesting, but it might also be limiting to people's creativity.

As always, informed consensus is the best guide.

Complex Rounds

After one or more free rounds have been played, each of the deities should have one or more Followers under their control, written entirely in black. This is not the real core of play – after all, these creations have had no opportunity to interact with one another.

Each player's turn begin with them selecting a die from the Pool for their use. If there are no dice left in the Cosmic Pool, they don't get any dice. They then Ready all their Busy Followers by rotating them slightly counter clockwise so they are aligned correctly with their owner.

After this they may perform a single Miracle, followed by as many Missions as they have Followers.

Miracles

Once each turn, the acting player may declare a Miracle that their Deity will attempt in their turn. It represents the direct influence of their divine will on the world. These Miracles are divided into three subcategories, Creations (black), Inspirations (Blue), and Temptations (Red).

The player should begin by selecting a die from their pool and placing it in front of them. They should then declare what sort of miracle their deity is performing and who or what Followers it is targeting. Their description should give a good idea of what Traits they hope to add or remove, and must specifically declare any targets.

Miracles can target as many Followers as desired, but you must spend an additional Trait for each target beyond the first.

Challenging the Miracle

Other deities can challenge any miracle, trying to subvert its effects to their will. Miracles cannot be stopped – the challenge only subverts its effects but does not cancel them.

Miracles are challenged by placing any die of the appropriate color and of a smaller die size than the last die placed. The owner of any targeted Follower has the first chance to respond, going from left to right if there are multiple targets. After target owners have had a chance to respond, all the players going from the left of the original player back to the original player have a chance to respond, including the original actor (he must use dice of his original color, not the response color). The response process continues until everyone passes.

Any time that a player has a chance to respond with a die of the appropriate size and color but chooses not to act, they may show it to the other players, put it back in their Divine Pool, and draw a die from the Cosmic Pool.

Resolving Miracles

Once all dice have been placed and descriptions made, the dice are rolled in order of placement. Each player adds their Deity's Affirmations to and subtracts their Pain from this roll, up to a maximum of the number rolled. This is the total number of traits they can add to the target Follower.

Once this is done the players write down Traits as appropriate to the color of dice used on the target Followers. All rolled dice are placed back in the Cosmic Pool.

The player with the lowest natural die roll narrates the results of the miracle and how all the Traits tie into the situation, without contradicting the declarations those other players made when they introduced their dice. Once all the other players are satisfied, that player may take a die from the Divine Pool. If the other players are dissatisfied, they may show their disapproval by offering the narrating player a die from their Divine Pool instead.

You cannot offer a blue die to an Ethos player in this manner.

Pain and Affirmation

Pain reduces the effects of all Miracles. Affirmations increase their effect.

At all times, players must keep a running total of the number of pain and affirmation Traits of all Followers under their control. These totals are the Deity's Pain and Affirmation scores.

The affirmation scores add to all Miracle die rolls they make. Their Pain subtracts from all Miracle die rolls they make. For convenience, you may wish to keep a running total, expressing Pain as a negative number.

The total of this modification can be no more than the number rolled on the die – so a very strong affirmation still only turns a roll of 1 into a 2, while a very strong pain cannot

If their Pain is enough greater than their Affirmations, they will be unable to perform any miracle.

Miracles of Inspiration

Color: Blue Response: Red

The player hopes to inspire their creations and fill them with the values that give them meaning. In turn, each of the other players from the right can challenge this Affirmation by describing how this miracle has unintended consequences that lead the targeted followers to sin in the eyes of their Deity. In this case the acting player is usually both the target and the actor (See Ethos below for a useful exception).

Inspired Followers remain Ready.

Miracles of Creation

Color: Black Response: Any

The player has their deity create a new Follower or perhaps several in one go. The acting player describes how these followers came into existence, whether through direct divine will or perhaps through more subtle guidance. Other players can respond by adding any Traits to these followers of the type indicated by the response dice color.

Created Followers come into play Busy.

Miracles of Temptation

Color: Red Response: Blue for Target's Owner, Any for others.

The acting player describes how their divine minions tempt and torture the follower of another deity, leading them into sin. Other player may challenge by describing how the targeted follower's faith is strengthened by temptation, how this temptation leads them into dangerous acts (Cross out Reality Traits) or how they come into new possessions or opinions (add Reality Traits).

Tempted Followers become Busy.

Miracles of Punishment

Color: Black Response: Black, Red

The acting player describes how their deity punishes or destroys their own Follower for their transgressions. Other players may respond by describing how the follower evades his Deity's wrath and is changed by the experience, perhaps falling deeper into sin.

The acting player can cross out reality traits with his points; the other players can add new ones of the appropriate color. Note again that this Miracle can only Target your own followers.

Punished Followers become Busy.

Missions

Missions represent the actions of the deity's followers. To begin a mission, the controlling player places a die of the appropriate color on any Follower they control and tilts the card somewhat to the right to indicate that this Follower is Busy.

Mission Resolution

Missions are not automatically successful. The goal is to roll less than the target number on a single die. The target number varies depending on the type of mission, but is usually the number of Traits of a certain color modified by the number of relevant Traits of the target and actor. If either follower is connected to a Ready Follower, they may be able to use two additional Traits from that connected Follower.

Other players may attempt to thwart missions that they fear. They can do this by adding any die of the same color as the acting player but of a higher size (IE, more faces). They can thwart the mission if and only if they roll exactly the target number of the mission. Otherwise the die is wasted. Passing on an opportunity to respond does not allow that layer to draw an additional die.

The player who rolls the highest total narrates the result of the mission. They do not have an opportunity to draw an additional die into their Divine Pool, and their narrations cannot be challenged.

Connections

Missions of Connection create Connections between Followers. Connections allow Followers to use up to two relevant Traits from any Ready Follower. In all other ways these Traits are considered to be part of the acting or target follower for the duration of the Mission.

The Follower directly involved in the conflict must have the Connection trait. Whether or not the Follower supplying the trait has a reciprocal Connection Trait is irrelevant.

Busy and Ready Followers

Followers that have just been Created, have been targeted by any Miracle except Inspiration, or that have already attempted a Mission are Busy. Busyness is indicated by rotating the card representing that follower slightly clockwise – about 15 degrees.

Busy followers cannot supply traits to other followers that are Connected to them.

Busy Followers become Ready at the beginning of their player's turn.

Deciding what Traits are Relevant

Eventually, there will be disputes about what Traits are relevant and what Traits are not. The goal should be to interpret things fairly literally. However, if an honest broker is needed, the uninvolved player closest to the owner of the Follower's right adjudicates the relevance of any proposed Trait. Uninvolved here means any player whose Followers are not targeted by the action being resolved. If there is frequently a problem with no uninvolved player being available to resolve disputes, you might want to agree that any action must leave at least one uninvolved player.

Missions of Faith

Goal: To increase the faith and faithfulness of the targeted Follower.

The target number is: Acting Follower's Affirmations + Acting Follower's Relevant Traits – Target's Pain – Target's Relevant Pain Traits

Success: Add Affirmation Traits to the Target Follower up to the Margin of Success (MOS).

Failure: Add Pain Traits to the Acting Follower up to the Margin of Failure.

Missions of Corruption

Goal: To corrupt and subvert followers into sin.

The target number is: Target's Pain + Acting Follower's Relevant Traits – Target's Affirmations – Target Follower's Relevant Traits

Success: Add Pain Traits to the Target Follower up to the Margin of Success (MOS).

Failure: Add Affirmation Traits to the Target Follower up to the Margin of Failure.

Missions of Destruction

Goal: To destroy errant and troublesome followers of any deity.

The target number is: Actor's Reality + Acting Follower's Relevant Traits – Target's Reality – Target Follower's Relevant Traits

Success: Remove Reality Traits from the Target Follower up to the Margin of Success (MOS).

Failure: Remove Reality Traits from the Target Follower up to the Margin of Failure.

Missions of Enticement

Goal: To convert followers of other deities into the service of your deity.

The target number is: Target's Pain + Acting Follower's Relevant Traits – 2 * Target's Affirmations – Target Follower's Relevant Traits

Success: Take control of the target follower. Change Pain Traits to Affirmation Traits up to the MOS. Mark the Target as Busy.

Failure: Add Affirmation Traits to the Target Follower up to the Margin of Failure.

Missions of Connection

Goal: To form connections between followers so they can help one another and share resources.

The target number is: Target's Pain + Acting Follower's Relevant Traits - Target Follower's Relevant Traits.

Success: Add a Connection Trait first to the acting Follower and then to the Target follower if the MOS is 2 or higher. These connections can only be to one another.

Failure: Add Affirmation Traits to the Target Follower up to the Margin of Failure.

Other Missions

It is more than possible that some player might have a logically appropriate mission for their agents to carry out that does not easily fall in the categories outlined above. For example, I considered the inclusion of missions of recruitment so that Ethos players might be able to increase the number of Followers under their control.

The Devil and the World's Pain

Eventually, one of the deities will accumulate so much pain that they will be unable to perform any miracles. At this point the deity's influence fades from the world and is replaced by an Ethos of Pain. The player crosses out the name of their deity and their affirmation in red. They feed on the forces that formerly plagued them.

Whenever a deity begins their turn in a position where their Pain – Affirmation is greater than the greatest roll they could make on any die in their possession (IE, no miracle they might perform could have any effect), their deity is destroyed. The player then takes all the red dice available in the Pool, exchanging them for any blue dice they might have. They have no further use for Affirmations.

They cannot perform miracles of creation or affirmation – instead they can only cause pain. They can only challenge miracles of affirmation.

However, at the beginning of any turn, they can cross out any affirmations that remain on their Followers in red and draw an additional red die from the pool.

Blue dice are entirely useless to them and black dice can only be used by their Followers when they attempt a mission.

Other players may wish to reduce the power of the Ethos Player's Pain by performing Miracles of Affirmation and Missions of Faith on their Followers. Successful applications cross out Pain Traits instead of increasing Affirmations.

Alternate: Ethos of Affirmation

For a different flavor of game, you might wish to allow destroyed deities to live on as an ethos of Affirmation. Instead of embracing the pain, they embrace the positive aspects of their destroyed religion. All rules above are reversed.

Monotheism

When only one deity remains, the game ends. You may consider this player the winner if you wish. Alternately, you might consider the number of positive traits the players have. You may wish to narrate as a group the final struggles of the deity. If the likely result of play seems to be the destruction of the

Design Notes

This game was designed on October 9th, 2005 as an entrant in the October 2005 Ronnies, using the keywords cosmos and pain. It is deeply indebted to Universalis, Capes and Magic: the Gathering. Other influences include Bacchanal (huge pools of colored dice), Amber Throne Wars (last man standing), and Populous.

The design clearly needs playtesting, but I've tried to paper over the obvious holes. If you do give it a try, please contact me at tonypace@gmail.com.