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# [Muse Actual Play] Azathoth Returns



**Demiurge**

March 10

Hi all!

I thought I'd chime in with a quick synopsis of the Muse game I just played with my colleagues. 😊 This is a brief synopsis of a pretty big story! I can provide the full plot if anyone is interested. It was a lot of fun to try out Muse with non-tabletop-gamers. This is our second adventure together, and they've fully grasped the rules, and I can really see their confidence, story-telling and creativity improving with every session.

### STORY SHEET

**Story Seed:** Modern era; Gaia (the spirit of the Earth) is the major source of magical power in this part of the universe. The Great Old Ones and the Elder Gods are locked in a struggle to either eat, or preserve, the Earth, respectively. Some time ago, the Elder Gods won a major battle. They bound Azathoth to human form and banished the Great Old Ones to Tartarus.

**Character:** Ozzie, a senile old man with a giant cone-shaped hearing aid. He is actually Azathoth, the blind idiot creator god, bound into mortal form and forced to protect the Earth. He is immortal and invincible. **Goal:** to find his grandson Avery. He must have left Avery around here somewhere...

**Relationship:** his grandson, Avery Mann **Relationship:** his great-great-grandson, Cthulhu the Great Old One

**Character:** Simone, a snarky, short elf that seems like a small child **Goal:** to free Azathoth so he can devour the Earth **Relationship:** she is a minion of Cthulhu, but not by choice

**Character:** Avery Mann, a normal-seeming young man. He is part god but doesn't know it. **Goal:** to establish a family and career as software developer **Relationship:** his psychologist Dr. Vladimir Nosfie, a vampire

**Scene:** the foot of the cross on Mount Royal

**Scene:** Decarie Square Mall, where Dr. Nosfie's office is.

**Scene:** the Jewish General Hospital psychology ward

**Threat:** the planets are approaching perfect discordance, which will leave Azathoth's binding at its weakest!

### SYNOPSIS

While on a hike at Mount Royal (a public park in Montreal similar in some ways to Central Park in New York City), Avery comes across a mysterious pair of round-spectacled glasses. After putting them on, he sees strange things and thinks he's going insane. Unbeknownst to Avery, the glasses give him the power of True Sight.

Avery goes to see his psychologist Dr Nosfie to talk about his sanity. Nosfie suggests that Avery should put on the glasses as part of his therapy, and Avery discovers that Nosfie is a vampire. They have a

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fight and Avery escapes and returns home.

From their prison in Tartarus, the Great Old Ones contact Simone and instruct her to bring Ozzie to meet with Avery.

On Mount Olympus, the Elder Gods send Hermes and Aphrodite to Earth to help Avery.

After some serious high jinks (including fights between Nosfie and Hermes, Avery being temporarily committed to the hospital Psych Ward, and Ozzie narrowly missing meeting Avery), Nosfie tracks Avery down to his home and rips his throat out. Avery comes back to life soon after Nosfie leaves, completely unharmed, although his apartment is covered in blood.

Avery realizes that he doesn't need the glasses anymore to have True Sight. He receives an interview offer from Google and leaves the apartment to take a trip to Mountain View, California.

Simone arrives at Avery's apartment, with Ozzie in tow, and finds the glasses--the glasses that she had arranged for Avery to find in the first place. She has tried and failed several times already to introduce Avery to Ozzie.

In Mountain View, Avery conducts his first interview at the GOOgleplex (the headquarters of Great Old One--GOO--worshippers on Earth). The old slogan of "*Don't be evil*" is their inside joke. The interview goes well, but Avery is whisked away by Hermes before Simone and Ozzie can catch up with him.

Avery is taken to Gaia, who explains some of the historical events to Avery, and tells him that Avery and Ozzie must be kept apart--but not exactly why. Simone and Ozzie arrive nearby, and Gaia sends Avery back to his home in Montreal. Avery is enchanted to thwart any future attempts by Simone and Ozzie to find him.

Avery meets a stunningly beautiful woman named Cleo (actually a shape-changing handmaiden of Aphrodite) and they agree to go out on a date.

Avery returns to the GOOgleplex for another round of interviews. Unfortunately, the final interview turns out to be an attempt to murder him in a ritual to free Azathoth! The ritual backfires when Avery comes back to life after all the cultists stab him.

Avery flees the GOOgleplex, dodging a variety of monsters, and manages to return home. The Elder Gods set up a war room in Avery's apartment, with Cleo present attending Aphrodite.

Avery refuses to take part, and leaves with Cleo on a romantic getaway to Venice. There, Simone's minions attempt to murder Avery for good by stealing his heart. They fail, and Cleo and Avery fall in love.

Meanwhile, Simone brings Ozzie with her to the Elder Gods' war room (in Avery's apartment). Ares, the God of War, attacks Ozzie, who lashes out in self-defense and kills all the Elder Gods present! This opens Pandora's Box and the world descends into chaos. Demons rise from below. The sky turns red as blood rains down. The seas boil.

Fortunately, Gaia arrives and resurrects Zeus and Poseidon, which at least pauses the end of the world. Avery convinces Cleo to marry him, and they get married in a park with Gaia and Zeus's blessing

Unfortunately, while Gaia was away from the heart of her power, Simone set a trap for her. Gaia is trapped on her throne, while the remaining Elder Gods are rendered insane by the power of the Void. The spell protecting Avery from Simone is cancelled.

Ozzie, now deranged and half-transformed back into his original form, attacks Avery--killing him over and over. Finally, Ozzie comes to his senses and stops.

Simone gives Avery one last chance to join the Great Old Ones before Azathoth devours the Earth. Gaia sends a message to Avery, letting him know that his love of Cleo is the key to his own power and victory. Avery refuses Simone's offer.

Avery channels his Love and transforms into the god Adonis. Simone, usurping the power of Hades, summons the legions of the dead to attack Avery/Adonis. Leading the legion is Ares, the now undead God of War. Ares gains the upper hand and wrestles Avery to the ground.

Avery summons up his Love again a creates a giant blast of light that destroys all nearby mystical bindings—including the magical binding keeping Ares's undead body together, the Void bindings that have rendered the Elder Gods insane, the trap on Gaia, and, unfortunately, the binding of the Ozzie shell on Azathoth! Ozzie the old man is cast aside and Azathoth is unleashed!

Azathoth grabs Simone, kicking and screaming, and devours her.

Gaia grants Avery the wisdom of the now-deceased Athena. Avery teleports Azathoth to Limbo, trapping him there, and agrees to become his permanent guardian. Avery reunites with Cleo and his grandfather Ozzie (now purely human) and they live a normal life together.

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I welcome any questions or comments.

--Jonathan

## Comments



Paul\_T  
March 10

That's quite a wild ride!

A few questions:

\* How many sessions did you play (you've mentioned before that they are VERY short sessions, so I assume quite a few)?

\* Are the other players nerds or (non-tabletop) gamers? It sounds like the group is well aware of a number of "gamer" tropes and materials, like the Cthulhu mythos, as well as Greek mythology, and that's an unusual combination of features.

\* Did you ever worry that things would get "too gonzo" for your tastes, or was it just a blast the whole time?

\* What were the Questions in play?

Finally:

In Mountain View, Avery conducts his first interview at the GOOgleplex (the headquarters of Great Old One--GOO--worshipers on Earth). The old slogan of "*Don't be evil*" is their inside joke.

[...]

Avery returns to the GOOgleplex for another round of interviews. Unfortunately, the final interview turns out to be an attempt to murder him in a ritual to free Azathoth!

That's hilarious! 😄



Demiurge

March 11 edited March 11

Hi Paul,

How many sessions did you play (you've mentioned before that they are VERY short sessions, so I assume quite a few)?

Yeah, we've really been pushing Muse to the limits. One of my design goals for the game was for a session to fit inside of a regular game convention time slot (about 3 hours or so). My coworkers and I have a strict 1 hour lunch break together, so it's been a challenge to fit in a meaningful session, including setup and teardown.

One key factor of success was that I kept a detailed chronicle of the story as we went along, and each player took a photo of their cards at the end of each session so they could restore the state at the start of the next session.

It took us 9 sessions to play through what would normally be a single session. Since each session was really more like 30 minutes of actual play, with 30 minutes of chatting and setup, that's about 4.5 hours of play time. Hence, a bit longer than normal but nothing catastrophic.

There were several sessions where one person couldn't make it, and I'm pleased to say that Muse handled this great! Since there are no exclusive PCs, it was easy for the remaining players to just narrate the story as usual. When the players got back they were able to listen to the synopsis I wrote up and keep going.

There were some minor issues when people lost their photo (and didn't know what cards they'd had), or came back after an absence and couldn't take exactly the same cards as they'd had last time. But these were pretty minor issues and easy to solve. If they didn't have a photo we just dealt them in like a new player (3 cards and 1 token), and we went first-come-first-served if there was a conflict between photos.

Are the other players nerds or (non-tabletop) gamers? It sounds like the group is well aware of a number of "gamer" tropes and materials, like the Cthulhu mythos, as well as Greek mythology, and that's an unusual combination of features.

No, they knew nothing of Cthulhu and just the basics about Greek mythology. They were a bit uncomfortable with the Cthulhu Mythos at first, but I just told them that it didn't matter if they got it exactly right--we could invent our own flavour of the Mythos. That helped them feel more comfortable with it.

I actually read the official Azathoth found in the Call of Cthulhu rule book *after* the Muse game and found it a bit disappointing. I like our version of Azathoth much better!

I also answered any questions they had regarding Greek Mythology, and it worked out great.

Did you ever worry that things would get "too gonzo" for your tastes, or was it just a blast the whole time?

We had a major gonzo moment when one of the players had the character of Avery start hearing the narrator's voice. It was very funny in the moment, but in-between sessions I discussed with the players and we walked back that scene because it was pretty dumb in retrospect.

We also noticed that because we didn't specify what magic could or couldn't do in the world, the spells people were casting were getting stronger and stronger over time. Some people wanted to introduce the concept of running out of Mana, but other narrators quickly found workarounds! Thinking back, it probably would have been good to define the magic system a bit better before starting.

The above-mentioned issues were not a big deal (actually, they were part of the fun). It was really fun the whole way through!!

What were the Questions in play?

- Subplot Question: Will Nosfi bite Avery? [Yes]
- Subplot Question: Will Ozzie find his grandson? [No]
- Subplot Question: Will Avery find his dream software engineering job? [Yes]
- Subplot Question: Will Avery convince Cleo to marry him? [Yes]
- Subplot Question: Will Simone literally steal Avery's heart? [No]
- Crisis Question: Will Simone release Azathoth? [Yes]

--Jonathan



**Paul\_T**  
March 12

Good answers, Jon!

Was the Crisis question set at the start, or added later?



**Demiurge**  
March 13 edited March 13

I think some of the questions had minor edits done to them to adapt them to the evolving story, but the Crisis Question was consistent throughout. We had a bit of a debate early-on as to whose Goal we should pick to be the Crisis Question. In the end we opted for Simone's because it seemed the most epic. However, Avery was definitely the main protagonist in the sense that the story revolved around him--so I guess that made Simone the main antagonist.

It's the first time I've ever played Muse that way. Usually, whoever is the focus of the Crisis Question is the protagonist (both literally, in the sense that the rules say so, but also in practice in the way the players narrate) and the story really focuses on them. It didn't cause any problems in play, but I do find it a bit weird in retrospect.

Avery got a lot of character development, whereas (aside from a sad origin story) Simone remained a 2-dimensional villain throughout the story. Heck, I think Ozzie had a much more interesting story arc than she did.

--Jonathan



**Paul\_T**  
March 13

Right, good observations. That's part of the reason I asked about the Questions: you can see how they might create that difference in depth you're talking about. (I sent you an email about this recently, too: the way we frame the Questions can create more or less character-based or action-based storylines, and this can be a fun thing to play with, both as gamers and as designers, I think.)



**Demiurge**  
March 16

Hi Paul,

Yeah, that's a good point. Simone's Questions were purely related to her villainy, whereas Avery had lots of character development Questions. If we'd wanted to make Simone more interesting, we probably would have had to give her some additional Goals and then added some Questions related to them.

Now that I've been playing the same Muse story over several sessions, it's gotten me thinking about campaign-style play with Muse. I'm wondering how to make it work. Muse stories often end destructively, with the world or even the whole universe left in a state from which it can never recover.

One initial thought is that there could be an overarching Question (perhaps called a Campaign Question) that hangs over each story. The interesting thing here is that no Narration can make it impossible for a Question to

come true or be denied. Hence, having a Campaign Question would prevent a narration from destroying the world, since the world would have to continue to exist at the end of each story for the Campaign Question to remain viable.

I suppose that when everyone is ready to end the campaign, they could have a final story where the Campaign Question becomes that story's Crisis Question.

What do you think?

--Jonathan



Paul\_T  
March 16

That's a pretty interesting idea. I believe I had brainstormed a similar concept back in the day, calling it "Episodic Musette". I'll have to see if I can find my notes!

It might also be a question which doesn't require a rules-based solution. Simply picking a smaller Crisis Question consciously could do the trick, for example. (As in Episodic Musette, you might want to scale up this Question with each subsequent game.)

You could leave it to the group's judgement or create a Scale (like in Trollbabe):

\* Personal, Town, City, Nation, World

...with each subsequent Crisis Question only being allowed to remain at the current level of Scale or move to the right by one step.

Then again, Marvel comics stories seem to somehow manage the "whole world blows up!" storylines ad nauseam, while maintaining some hint of continuity. That seems challenging to me, though!

Another idea is to create a larger framing device which shifts the focus of each story. Like *In a Wicked Age...*, a semi-random process helps us brainstorm an entirely different story, but with some overlap (in that game, it's usually a single character that carries through from one Chapter into the next). Then we might later decide how the stories fit together: they may not be chronologically sequential, for instance.

You could have some structure along those lines: "At the end of each game, the winner gets to pick one character from the story who is of interest but whose story has not been fully explored. The next game will feature that character; if the character is dead or otherwise "played out", then it will take the form of a prequel/backstory /origin story."



Paul\_T  
March 16

(Looks like we had discussed this a touch here, before:

<http://www.story-games.com/forums/discussion/21397/muse-deluxe-edition-available>)



Demiurge  
March 16

Yeah, you mentioned that you wrote some rules for [Episodic Play](#). What you've written there is a good start, but I see some issues with it as-written:

1. There are no rules to guarantee (or at least encourage) that the next Chapter somehow fits into a coherent whole. Simply having a next step doesn't guarantee that the story is eventually going somewhere interesting.
2. There's nothing to stop someone's ending narration from going too far. In your provided example, I could have narrated that the spies escape, warn the Rebellion and then Luke Skywalker comes back and blows up the Death Star, does it a second time, and then kills the Emperor. I've gone way too far ahead, but there was

nothing stopping me from doing that!

3. It requires a significant modification of how each session is played, which I'd rather avoid. To me, the ideal would be to add a few simple rules on top of the existing rules.

In any case, this is just food for thought! I'm not looking for an answer today. Lots of playtesting would be required, in any case, before I would write anything official.

--Jonathan



**Demiurge**

March 16

Woah, those are some really good ideas! For some reason, I only saw your second post when I responded before.

Another idea is to create a larger framing device which shifts the focus of each story. Like *In a Wicked Age...*, a semi-random process helps us brainstorm an entirely different story, but with some overlap (in that game, it's usually a single character that carries through from one Chapter into the next). Then we might later decide how the stories fit together: they may not be chronologically sequential, for instance.

I really like the above idea too as an alternative--to pick a piece from the previous story and weave it into your next one.

--Jonathan



**Demiurge**

March 16

Actually, it just struck me that some of the ideas from Episodic Play made it into the final version of Muse as the Crisis Question!



**DeReel**

March 16 edited March 16

Here my game and Nerves of Steel are different from Muse and Musette : the status of Questions is changing as the story goes. Players don't know what Questions will be the important ones in the end, and they don't know when a given question will be answered, only that, if players care enough, a given question will get its answer. The narrative structure develops from this.

Whereas in your games, questions develop inside an established narrative frame. It is much more focused and often efficient, but less open to players.



**Paul\_T**

March 17

All exactly right (saying this to both of you).

Jon, aside from the idea of continuing from session to session, the rules for Episodic Play are basically identical (except in the specifics of the implementation) to the current Muse rules: there is a larger, overarching Question which can only be contributed to by winning the resolution of other Questions (subplot Questions), and it is resolved at the end, after the subplot Questions have been resolved.

So, the only elements you'd need to use/borrow would be a) the idea of the winner coming up with Chapter Title (or, in this case, Crisis Question) for the next session, and some way to determine who gets to contribute an important element to it (the same mechanism, of the best hand remaining, could be used here). Otherwise, it's basically the game structure that ended up in *Muse*.

As for whether we need special rules to keep things "under control" or under wraps, I don't know. On one hand, it can be nice, right? The "scale" idea I mentioned before could be used for that, or your idea of a mega-Crisis-Question (which presumably gets added to *at the end of every session*, by the Epilogue narrator - you get to win one mega-Crisis-Question token by winning a session of Muse, in other words), could work there.

On the other hand, if everyone goes into the session with that in mind (that there is a next session, that it will build on this one, and so forth) could be sufficient. After all, we already do that for Questions (we are aware that they play a smaller role, and therefore aim for smaller stakes), without a specific rule to enforce it. It would be worth trying, in any case.



**Paul\_T**  
March 17

(Also, you'll note that the Heroic Musette rules add-on does a "mega-Crisis Question", like you suggest, except that it also escalates it with each subsequent session, which I find pretty interesting. There could be something to play with there! It could be escalating, it could be building in detail/specificity, or evolving from session to session in some other way.)



**Demiurge**  
March 23

@Paul\_T

Yeah, all the ideas mentioned here merit some playtesting. I'm going to note them down...

@DeReel

I'm looking forward to seeing some detailed examples, an actual play, or whatnot, since I wasn't able to understand the rules as-written.

Thanks all!

--Jonathan



**DeReel**  
March 23

Well... working and gardening keep me away from writing at the moment. But by July I'll have something.



**Demiurge**  
March 25

You're able to do gardening this time of year? I am jealous. My garden still looks like Hoth.

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