Story Games   Discussions

Muse - A New Storytelling Game

Demiurge
February 2008   edited February 2008

Hi,

After a lot of writing and playtesting, Paul Taliesin and I have finished writing a new storytelling game called Muse. It's a game designed for people with busy schedules. It attempts to allow you to play a fun roleplaying-like game with no preparation time required. There's no game master, so nobody has the added burden of coming up with a story on their own, and there are no exclusive characters (i.e. PCs exclusive to a player) and no character sheets.

I'd be overjoyed if you'd read our game or even give it a try. Please let me know what you think of it.

You can download Muse in PDF or ePub format at the official website.

Here's a little blurb about the game:

Muse is a storytelling game where players collaborate and compete with each other to tell an enjoyable story. Players will take turns, with each of them contributing to a single story. Play will pass from player to player in clockwise order, unless listeners jump in or object. Players will inspire each other to create story elements, which will get combined into questions about the plot. No-one knows in advance how questions will finally be answered. The game ends when no more questions can be created and the last question in play has been answered. The player with the best hand remaining gets to narrate the story's epilogue.

Sincerely,

--Jonathan

Comments

misuba
February 2008

Hey, so, I like this a lot. It looks really promising. I wonder a bit about the odds in card contests, and about the contents of the Veto section... and, in a similar vein to the latter, whether just giving examples of "good additions" is going to be sufficient (compared to incentivizing them mechanically somehow).

A couple of questions: have you tested this at all? And, because I'm curious, what-all inspired you to make it?

Anyways. Thanks for bringing this here!

Paul_T
February 2008

Hello!

I'm the "Paul" who helped develop this game, although this last draft is entirely Jon's. I haven't even played this version.

That said, the last version was a lot of fun!

Jon and I started working on this together over a year and a half ago. We've played a bunch of different variants, with a bunch of different people, and a lot of good things have come out of this concept. The latest version, which you're seeing, though, is Jon's beast. We live in different cities now, and I haven't had any hand in writing or playtesting this particular version.

He's changed a couple of things I don't like, and a couple of things I really like as well, so I'm just as curious as you to see how it fares in its current form.

I can answer your questions, though:

--I don't think incentivizing "good additions" is necessary at all. In past versions, there was never even any advice given, and I don't remember seeing a single addition by a single player that didn't work out well in playtests.

--How did this game come about? As a result of a conversation between Jon and myself. Jon, do you want to share, or do you mind if I do?

Thanks for the positive response!

Robert_Bohl
February 2008

Sell me on this! What's the game about? What's the in-fiction vibe? Why do I want to skim this, much less play or buy (?) it?

Graham
February 2008

Jonathan, it's interesting stuff. I like the way you create the questions. Have you played it much? How's it working?

G

Demiurge
February 2008

Hi Misuba,

Thanks for your feedback!

> A couple of questions: have you tested this at all? And, because I'm curious, what-all inspired you to make it?

Yes! We've tested Muse quite a lot. I'd say we've had about a half-dozen serious playtests of Muse and Muse-like variants.

As for what inspired us... lots of things. I used to GM most of the time for my group of RPG players, but as an adult with a full-time job and a busy schedule I didn't really have the time for it anymore. This inspired me to create a new game that required no preparation on the part of the GM or the players--but that could somehow still reliably generate fun stories.

Paul and I started reading every storytelling game we could get our hands on. We started playtesting some ideas. I'd say that my main influences have been Baron Munchausen and 1001 Nights. The Questions were Paul's invention and they got inspired from Cape as far as I know.

Sincerely,

--Jonathan

Paul_T
February 2008

Robert-

There's no "in-fiction vibe". It's a universal game (like Universalis or something like that), not bound to any genre.

The fun part is that it's very simple and it allows you to tell great stories pretty effortlessly and with no prep. It doesn't require any special player skills like many indie RPGs (scene framing, stake setting, etc). It's written for anyone who wants to try it--gamers, families, parties, etc.

Does that answer that question?

jenskot
February 2008

The only pitch I need is that Paul T. was involved! We haven't met in person but I think we have similar tastes and I'm a big fan of his work. Click... download!

Robert_Bohl
February 2008

> Posted By: Paul T.
> Does that answer that question?

Somewhat. I have Dreamation Indie Games Roundtable on the brain, though, and I'm wondering what's my hook? Why do I want to read this? Make me excited!

(Or tell me to fuck off because I'm being a presumptuous dick; that's cool too 🙂).

Demiurge
February 2008   edited February 2008

Hi Robert,

> Sell me on this! What's the game about? Why do I want to skim this, much less play or buy (?) it?

First off, Muse is free. :-) That's an easy sell, I hope!

As for why you might want to play:

- If you like gaming (roleplaying or storytelling games) and you find that you're lacking in preparation time, then I humbly offer Muse as a potential solution to your temporal woes!
- Muse allows you to do things you can't in a regular RPG. You can have all the main characters die in a terrible tragedy, for example. You can have only one main character, which opens up a whole range of new story genres that are hard to explore in RPGs (where you generally expect a party size of 4 or 5 people).
- Muse really helps spark and focus your creativity. You can actually use it as a tool as well as a game, to generate new story scenarios for use in books, movies or RPGs.

--Jonathan

Demiurge
February 2008   edited February 2008

Hi Graham,

> Jonathan, it's interesting stuff. I like the way you create the questions.
> Have you played it much? How's it working?

Thanks!

Like I said above, we've run maybe 6 or so serious playtests involving lots of friends. If anyone at this site playtests Muse, though, it'll be the first blind test (i.e. a test involving none of the original designers).

As for how it's working... how about I'll list some of the story scenarios my friends and I have created with Muse? :

- A giant alien robot from outer space lands on a farm. He struggles to save the Earth from alien invaders while joining forces with Bob the farmer.

- Vampires invade a small town, and it's up to the Professor (a distant descendant of Van Helsing) to track them down and kill them before they create an epidemic.

- In a fantasy world, dwarves are greatly discriminated against. One brave dwarf learns of an evil cult of blood-drinkers that are out to exterminate the dwarves. He invades their citadel and tries to steal their greatest artifacts...

- In Cold War East Berlin, evil wizards summon up an army of undead to aid them in their world conquest, while a former collaborator tries to defect to the West.

- A superhero with the dubious power that he can fly--but only if no-one is looking at him--fights to save New York City from an evil alien computer and a vodoo priest. Is it a bird? Is it a plane? Whatever it is, it's falling...

- The latest seasons of Dr. Who tell us that the Time War destroyed the Time Lords' home planet of Galifrey, and (most) of the Daleks. How did this happen? Why was The Doctor (almost) the only one of his race to survive?

Robert_Bohl
February 2008

Thanks, Demi. That's more what I was looking for.

VBWyrde
February 2008

> Muse really helps spark and focus your creativity. You can actually use it as a tool as well as a game, to generate new story scenarios for use in books, movies or RPGs.

This strikes at the angle I was coming at this from, thinking to myself, gosh this looks like it could be a handy Story Generation method for my game... should I get stuck for story. I could use this myself in brainstorm mode (which is to say simply follow the rules methodology but do the narration and brainstorming myself), or with one or two other players offline from the game to establish backstory, or with the group between campaigns... or some such. I'm not done reading the rules yet though ... I'll post a review when I finish. Very cool so far though (page 10)! Thanks!

Demiurge
February 2008

Hi VBWyrde,

> I could use this myself in brainstorm mode (which is to say simply follow the rules methodology but do the narration and brainstorming myself), or with one or two other players offline from the game to establish backstory, or with the group between campaigns... or some such.

Muse is also not a bad idea for a "slow game day" where half your players didn't show up and you don't want to play the regular campaign. You can come up with ideas together with which to seed the campaign...

One thing I'd like to do with Muse is figure out how to play with only 2 players (right now it requires 3 or more). If you give it a try and come up with any ideas, please let me know!

> I'll post a review when I finish. Very cool so far though (page 10)! Thanks!

Great! I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

--Jonathan

VBWyrde
February 2008

Hi Johnathan,

As promised I have finished reading the rules and am ready to give you my thoughts. However, first let me say that I'm totally new to the whole story game thing and I come from a traditionalist D&Dish background (not even because my friends and I have always played homebrew games, based on D&D, but not D&D). Also, I have not actually played any story games, having no one nearby who I know that is into this kind of thing, unfortunately. So therefore I have not had the chance to play your game. Also, I will add that I am not 100% sure I understood all of the nuances by reading the rules and think it would take a game or two for me to formulate a truly effective opinion.

That said, I must say I find this intriguing. I think this would provide an interesting mechanism for story development for intra-campaign scenarios, as you mentioned. That's how I would see using this. In this case I think the stakes for the Players would be rather high, and therefore the energy of the Muse session would be high, since the Players would undoubtedly have issues related to their Characters at stake. So the stories would relate to past and future campaigns. I think that's an awesome idea, and an interesting way to pull it off.

I like the poker aspect, though I must admit I also see possibilities for using dice with similar effects. The issues is that the Players be able to gamble on something to take control of the story that means something to them (in this case their Characters in my world). All in all, I give this high marks for being a creative story development system. As far as how it would play out as a game in its own right, it's a little hard to visualize for me, but with the right group of creative minds I think it could be quite fun.

I'll keep it around and the next time I get a chance I'll try it with whomever I can. It would be great to have a two-person option on this game I totally agree. If I can contrive one (possibly using dice) I'll let you know. I certainly wouldn't have a problem recommending it to other GMs who might use my Elthos RPG in the future if you didn't object. It would be something like, "and for an interesting intra-campaign story development system you might try out Muse" or some such. Anyway, thanks. Very cool.

Mark

Paul_T
February 2008

Mark,

We used dice up until the last two revisions of the rules. Cards are just easier to manipulate and stack at the table. They also add an extra tactical element to the game.

I really recommend you try it! It's a neat story engine.

Paul

VBWyrde
February 2008

Yeah, well like I said, I think the poker aspect does sound cool. Fo shizzle. It made me think of what *might* be doable with other gambling formats. Craps came to mind. But of course I haven't a clue how I'd do it until I actually find some people in the area who might be interested. I'll certainly give it a try asap.

Demiurge
February 2008

Hi VBWyrde,

Thanks for the kind words. I also don't have a huge amount of experience in story games (does anyone?), and Muse is my first strong foray into this mysterious other-worldy dimension of fun.

Please let me know when you give Muse a try!

If you have any questions on how to play, you can post to this thread for now. I'm going to create a Muse webpage with an email link soon so you'll be able to email me questions in future and download updates or extras from there.

Regarding using a deck of cards instead of dice: using a deck of playing cards has other advantages as well (in addition to what's already been mentioned by Paul):

- You don't need to buy 60d6 (which is what I did to playtest the earlier revisions of Muse).
- Everyone has a deck of cards, so anyone can play Muse.
- Since there are no funny-looking dice or props, you just might be able to trick a non-gamer into playing.
- With poker hands, you can't get ties (ties were a bit of a problem with d6).

Sincerely,

--Jonathan

TanRu
February 2008   edited February 2008

> Posted By: VBWyrdeYeah, well like I said, I think the poker aspect does sound cool. Fo shizzle. It made me think of what *might* be doable with other gambling formats. Craps came to mind. But of course I haven't a clue how I'd do it until I actually find some people in the area who might be interested. I'll certainly give it a try asap.

Rob's Misspent Youth uses craps-based resolution.

Downloading Muse now...

Demiurge
February 2008

Hi TanRu,

Please let me know what you think of Muse!

Thanks,

--Jonathan

Ry
February 2008

Online card aren't really an option, but no prep is highly intriguing. At the same time ordering / stacking dice is cumbersome online also.

What would you suggest for online play? Is it even possible with Muse?

Paul_T
February 2008

Man... playing Muse online. That's tough with the cards thing.

The mechanics would need to be changed, for sure. Oddly enough, an earlier version that I wrote, which you can find here...

Kitchen Muse

...would work online. It uses dice instead of cards.

Demiurge
February 2008

Hi Ryan,

> Posted By: Ryan StoughtonWhat would you suggest for online play? Is it even possible with Muse?

Originally, Muse used dice! To reduce the odds of a tie, use the largest-sized dice you can (d100 or even d1000 if you're brave). Basically, your hand will be made up of dice instead of cards. In a showdown, whenever you'd reveal a card you instead roll a die from your hand. Whoever has the die with the highest face value wins. If the players are tied for highest face value, then they set aside that die, and consider the next highest face value. If one player runs out of dice in this way then they lose. In the case of a complete tie, the players reroll all their dice.

e.g. with d100

Alice rolls: 99, 50, 30
Bob rolls: 75, 63, 40, 11
Alice wins (her 99 is the highest face value)

Alice rolls: 30, 10, 3
Bob rolls: 30, 5
Alice wins (they're tied with the 30s, but Alice's 10 beats Bob's 5)

Alice rolls: 30, 10, 3
Bob rolls: 30, 10
Alice wins (she and Bob are perfectly tied for the 30 and the 10, but she has an extra die)

Alice rolls: 65, 49, 36
Bob rolls: 65, 49, 36
Tie (re-roll)

I hope that answers your question!

--Jonathan

Paul_T
February 2008

For anyone planning to play this game, a house rule I would use:

--When "turning the tides", you may only add cards that match either the value or the suit of a card already on the table (and on your side of the Question).

(Jon will probably disagree with this, but there it is.)

kadu kadu
March 2008

Hi,

I've read the game and it looks quite nice. I didn't like the way Universalis handles conflicts (with tons of dice) and the poker hand system seems more attractive to me. So, maybe I'll give this game a try between my usual game sessions, to see how it works. The one change to the rules I'd make would be the Epilogue. If I get it right only one person does the epilogue, and then the session finishes. I've just read The Comitee for the Exploration od

Mysteries and it makes the epilogue work like that:

1. the winner (in this case thad would be the best hand owner) narrates the epilogue
2. the next best hand owner narrataes something, but cannot negate or change the meaning of what was said by the winner
3. and so on, to the worst hand owner.

So, everybody has his own part of it.

> Posted By: DemiurgeSell me on this! What's the game about? Why do I want to skim this, much less play or buy (?) it?

First off, Muse is free. :-) That's an easy sell, I hope!

Include some good illustrations, too. That always helps ;-)

Best Regards,
Tomasz

Demiurge
August 2008

Thanks, Tomasz, that epilogue finale a very good idea that I might introduce in the next edition...

For the pictures, you are absolutely right! After a lot more work and playtesting I'm currently working on the print version of Muse, first edition. It will include pictures. :-)

I'll post the download link on the Story Games forum as soon as I'm done.

MikeRM MikeRM
August 2008

Matt Machell and I are working on a browser-based online client for playing SG-style RPGs, and our plan for a bit down the track is to support cards, since several good story-games use them.

SquidLord
August 2008

> Matt Machell and I are working on a browser-based online client for playing SG-style RPGs, and our plan for a bit down the track is to support cards, since several good story-games use them.

Something like that would make my ongoing life about 75% easier, even with MapTool, if you can do things that are shared across views. Hell, it might even be easier to see if you can't just help add things to MT, since it already does a lot of the shared space management.

Demiurge
September 2011   edited September 2011

Posted By: MikeRM

> Matt Machell and I are working on a browser-based online client for playing SG-style RPGs, and our plan for a bit down the track is to support cards, since several good story-games use them.

Wow, I was actually thinking of writing such an online tool for Muse myself. I guess a generic online client that supported cards would work and save me a lot of time! Has your tool gotten anywhere in the last several years?

UserClone
September 2011

+1 to the really helpful illustrations. I feel like I know exactly what the table ought to look like at any given moment. I feel like there may be a bit of a steep learning curve to the card game aspects, but no more than say, M:TG (Alpha). I like the token mechanic, it's reminiscent of a really stripped-down Capes type of thing. Cool stuff, all!

Demiurge
September 2011

Thank you for the kind words!

In my experience teaching new people the game so far (at game conventions), narrations are the hardest part to explain and learn. People usually understand how the cards work pretty fast. But then again, gamers are pretty used to some very complex rules.

Paul_T
September 2011

I'll second that!

The card rules are REALLY simple. It's basically "highest card wins", right?

And many of the mechanics Jon uses here WERE an attempt by me to simplify Capes' rules, so you're right on about that source of inspiration.

jdfristrom
September 2011

> Posted By: DemiurgeFirst off, Muse is free. :-) That's an easy sell, I hope!

There's still an attention cost! The cost of figuring it out and gathering up some guys and playing it. And you're up against Archipelago II and Geiger Counter - which are also free rules-light no-prep single-session GM-less story games. (Which you should try playing if you haven't.) (And now that Ralph just released Universalis as a $10 PDF you've got the gold standard of no-character ownership storytelling games to beat ...) So, sell harder - why play your game instead of Archipelago II?

> Posted By: Paul T.
> The card rules are REALLY simple. It's basically "highest card wins", right?

Hopefully this is constructive feedback - the rules don't look simple, from reading the text. There's pictures of cards needing to be sorted, rules for 'turning the tide', I kind of glazed over and wasn't sure if I wanted to invest the energy in figuring it out.

My other piece of not-so-constructive feedback would be I *love* character ownership. That's mostly a personal taste thing, though I do believe that character ownership automatically invests us in the characters in a way that other media can't do. When I play Universalis I use a character ownership gimmick...

Paul_T
September 2011

Ah, interesting!

Jon, you may want to check out the presentation of the card rules. They shouldn't *look* complicated, because they're not.

As for character ownership? I'm not Jon... but I would say that if you love character ownership, this won't be your favourite game. There is none of that in Muse.

Demiurge
September 2011

Posted By: Paul T.

> Jon, you may want to check out the presentation of the card rules. They shouldn't *look* complicated, because they're not.

Yes, this is the second comment on how complicated Turning the Tides looks. It's very simple. I must have put so much effort on clarifying narration that I neglected the cards explanation. At least people aren't finding the narration hard to understand, because that's the part that is actually tough.

Demiurge
September 2011   edited September 2011

Posted By: jdfristrom

> There's still an attention cost! The cost of figuring it out and gathering up some guys and playing it. And you're up against Archipelago II and Geiger Counter – which are also free rules-light no-prep single-session GM-less story games. (Which you should try playing if you haven't.)

Yes! Thanks for those names, I will look them up. 🙂

> (And now that Ralph just released Universalis as a $10 PDF you've got the gold standard of no-character ownership storytelling games to beat ...)

I don't consider Universalis to be direct competition. It's still a role-playing game in my view--Muse is a pure storytelling game. However, now that a PDF is available maybe I can finally buy the game?

> So, sell harder – why play your game instead of Archipelago II?

Good question! I will read the game and find out.

> Hopefully this is constructive feedback – the rules don't look simple, from reading the text. There's pictures of cards needing to be sorted, rules for 'turning the tide', I kind of glazed over and wasn't sure if I wanted to invest the energy in figuring it out.

That is constructive, thank you. The rules are simple, my presentation must be off.

> My other piece of not-so-constructive feedback would be I *love* character ownership. That's mostly a personal taste thing, though I do believe that character ownership automatically invests us in the characters in a way that other media can't do.

There's nothing wrong with your opinion or taste. I made Muse in part because I don't love character ownership. I have to say that Muse is probably not the right game for you. However, I've found many people that were surprised to discover just how much fun *not* owning a character could be... Muse is a game for people that love collaborative storytelling more than playing a role.

UserClone
September 2011

While it may be the part that Trad gamers find tough, I think you'll find no shortage amongst Indie gamers willing to narrate the shit out of...pretty much any game. So really, the only problems for them are the logistical, systematic ones. I for one found the pictures and examples super handy by way of explaining Turning the Tides, but I guess it could be put into more bite-size chunks...

Demiurge
September 2011

Posted By: UserClone

> While it may be the part that Trad gamers find tough, I think you'll find no shortage amongst Indie gamers willing to narrate the shit out of...pretty much any game.

Great! I think these players will get a real kick out of Muse.

> I for one found the pictures and examples super handy by way of explaining Turning the Tides, but I guess it could be put into more bite-size chunks

Thank you. I will see what I can do to improve the explanation of the card mechanics. Bite-sized chunks...

--Jonathan

Paul_T
September 2011

I wonder if "Turning the Tides" would be better understood if it was renamed "Play a Card". Because that's all it is: you play one card that's better than what your opponent has. Now you win!

I wonder what element of the text is making it sound more complicated than that?

UserClone
September 2011   edited September 2011

Y'know, you could just as easily call that "one-upmanship" and I'd get it...

I'm guessing "pissing contest" doesn't really follow your game's aesthetic. :-P

Demiurge
September 2011

Yeah, the terminology might be part of the issue... "pissing contest," ha! :-)

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