

Story Games Discussions

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Muse vs. Universalis


Demiurge

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Hi,

In my quest to explore the space of Storytelling Games (STGs), that is to say story games where players don't necessarily control characters directly like in an RPG, I've put together a comparison between [Muse](#) and [Universalis](#). It's an STG double-bill review!

Both games have a lot in common and a lot that's different, but they're both aiming for essentially the same niche: the generic STG.

I should say in the interest of full disclosure that I'm Muse's author, however, I've done my best to be neutral in this review. If I've made any errors with regard to Universalis, please feel free to correct me and I'll edit the review.

I hope you find this interesting, and I look forward to hearing your comments or questions. Enjoy!

1. Muse costs \$0 and is available in PDF or ePub format. Universalis costs \$10 USD for the DRM-free PDF or \$20 USD for the book.
2. Both games are genre-agnostic--they can be used to play any kind of fictional setting or style.
3. Muse is a pure Storytelling Game (STG) where players do not directly play the roles of characters. Universalis is a hybrid STG/RPG that uses narration and still allows players to say dialogue through a character.
4. Universalis plays best with 3-6 players with a sweet spot of around 4-5 players, Muse plays best with 3-6 players.
5. In terms of material requirements, Muse requires a 52-card deck of regular playing cards, a bunch of tokens (30 maximum) and some pen and paper to play. Universalis requires about 50 tokens (Coins) per player, about 10d10 or 10d6 per player, pencils, and a good supply of paper, index cards or sticky notes.
6. A Universalis session tends toward 3-6 hours of play time (however it can be tailored to fit into a 4-hour convention slot if necessary). A Muse session runs for about 3-4 hours. Both games work well for one-shots and have potential for follow-up sessions.
7. Both games do not single out one player as referee or Game Master (i.e. all players play equally).
8. Both games require no pre-preparation before the session starts. Once the session begins Muse is fairly structured; players collectively brainstorm a Story Sheet that sets up the story's starting conditions: a community of motivated characters and major conflicts and scenery. In Universalis the setup is largely freeform; players take turns defining Tenets that prescribe the game's content and style, but it is not necessary for all story elements to be included up-front.
9. Both games do not assign unique ownership of a character to a player. In Muse, players have temporary control of all story elements whenever it's their turn as Narrator. In Universalis, no matter whose turn it is any player can spend 1 Coin to gain control over a story element (Component).
10. Universalis creates stories that tend to start out somewhat chaotic, however, one of its defining features is how an interesting story will typically emerge from the chaos. Muse has a focused story from beginning to end.
11. In Muse, games are not expected to be silly unless that's what the players decide they want during the setup. In Universalis it's considered normal for players' first few sessions to be silly

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- (everything but the kitchen sink) type games, with sessions becoming more serious after more solid Tenets are written in subsequent games.
12. In Muse there is no explicit scene framing; players may set up scenes as they wish. In Universalis the Framing Player is selected based on a bidding contest; this player frames the scene (deciding time, place, characters present, etc.) and decides when the scene ends.
 13. In both games, after a player's turn ends the next player is generally chosen in clockwise order. There are exceptions to this rule in both games.
 14. In terms of the exceptions to the regular clockwise turn order: In Universalis, paying 1 Coin allows you to Interrupt and it becomes your turn. This can be done most of the time and repeatedly. In Muse, players can Jump In (to make it their turn immediately) by starting a card bidding contest, and this can only happen once per turn.
 15. Universalis has a designated Recorder that writes down the important Facts of the story in bullet points as the session is played. In Muse only the Story Sheet and Questions (major conflicts) are written down; most of the writing is done during early Story Sheet brainstorming, during the game only new Questions are written down (and that's fairly infrequent).
 16. Universalis differentiates between Color (ephemeral story flavour) and Fact (solid information about the story that players should respect in their narrations); establishing Facts is paid for with Coins. Muse treats everything narrated as facts that must be respected during subsequent narrations.
 17. In Universalis, as a player narrates and adds new Facts to the story they pay 1 coin per Fact. Many coins (5 or 20 for example) might be paid during a single turn. In Muse, players generally pay 1 card per turn to take ownership of the Yes or No side of a Question (in-game conflict), and narrate the evolution of that conflict as it is pushed toward being answered with a Yes or a No resolution.
 18. In Muse, if a player is narrating something and another player would prefer a different outcome, that player may Jump In to (optionally) erase the last few sentences of narration and take over the turn. In Universalis, under similar circumstances players may informally negotiate for their preference and, if necessary, formally Challenge by starting a bidding contest in which the players collectively vote on which outcome they would prefer.
 19. In terms of in-game conflict between characters, Universalis uses Complications while Muse uses Questions.
 20. Complications happen either spontaneously (Originating a Complication) or when players wish to have their owned Components act against another player's Components. During Complications the players bolster their chances of winning the conflict by identifying Facts that will help them win. This allows players to collect dice for use during the resolution, when they will roll to see which side wins the conflict (more dice improves your odds of winning).
 21. Questions are defined during Muse's setup phase and during play. There are two types of Questions: the Crisis Question and Subplot Questions. The Crisis Question asks the main question of the story, "Will the main character achieve their goal?" The Subplot Questions ask lesser questions in the story, typically "Will some character advance/achieve their goal?" Each Question has a Yes side and a No side. During play, players will narrate and pay 1 card (or token for the Crisis Question) to take control of the Yes side or No side for that Question. When the Question is ready to be answered, a Showdown occurs and the winner gets to narrate the outcome based on whichever side they own.
 22. In Muse, Questions evolve simultaneously as the story progresses and up to 3 Questions can overlap at the same time. In Universalis, Complications are resolved one at a time and cannot overlap each other or overlap between scenes.
 23. Both conflict systems involve players competing against each other to narrate the story, and both

provide rewards to the winning and losing side(s). In Universalis, both the winners and losers get to narrate (although winners get the advantage of narrating first). In Muse, only the winner narrates. In Universalis, the winners get lots of Coins while the losers get fewer Coins, while in Muse the winners get tokens (usable for helping the player to win the game) and the losers get cards (usable for increasing story power during the game).

24. A Universalis session ends when all of the players agree that it is over; there is no winner. A Muse session ends when the Crisis Question has been answered and we discover if the main character achieves their goal or not; the winning player narrates the outcome.

Sincerely,

--Jonathan

Comments



Paul_T
October 2011

Great double-review, Jon. You've covered a lot of things there.

I was going to make a separate post about this, but maybe I'll just mention it here instead:

Muse is very similar to Microscope in terms of the way it feels in play. Players take turns to add pieces to the story, pushing in forward or adding twists as they like, much like how in Microscope you take turns to define bits of the story: it's not a collaborative process, but one where you all take turns, with the rules of the game providing a structure that helps keep everyone on the same page.

Muse creates a dynamic story; Microscope creates a history or chronology, so in that sense they feel quite different, but the basics of playing the game feel similar. Both games have a mechanic for negotiating disagreements between players, but they are not expected to come into play very often, much like Vetos and Fines in Universalis.

Both games jump around quite a bit from turn to turn: in Microscope, you leap back and forth through history, zooming in and out. In Muse, you jump around the various plotlines, regularly "cutting" back and forth between the various storylines. (In the optional Turning the Tides variation with extra narration, it feels like "zooming in" during tense moments of conflict resolution, as well.)

A question for anyone willing to take it up:

* If you have NOT played either Muse or Universalis, but have an opportunity to read both texts: what's your impression of complexity? Does one game seem more complicated or more accessible than the other? Which one gives the sense of being more challenging?

(I'd ask about gameplay, but to the best of my knowledge no one has yet played both Muse and Universalis, in order to be able to compare.)

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