

Apotheosis

A role-playing game about how legends evolve by Gordie Murphy



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Stories Change

Little Red Riding Hood began was first told sometime in the 10th century by European peasants, and was passed down in oral tradition until it was written down and popularized by Charles Perrault in the 17th century. In the 19th century, the Brothers Grimm created another well-known version. The versions vary greatly, and in another few centuries will look completely different. Little Red Riding Hood's phylogeny includes hundreds of variants.

Our stories evolve over time, influenced by the people who told them to each other around campfire and bedsides, wrote them down, then digitized them. Our understanding of our stories changes as our culture does.

But for every story that we remember, dozens more might be forgotten.

How many stories have been lost to time?

What Is Apotheosis?

In Apotheosis, 2-5 players will explore the relationship between a culture's history and their dominant cultural story as they create and change a legend over the course of generations.

Your goal as players is to tell an interesting story about the culture you'll develop, and to tell their dominant story in turn. You'll be telling this story collaboratively: each player will be roleplaying as an abstraction of the culture, not as specific characters.

You'll create and develop the basics of the culture together, seed their original dominant legend, and then watch that legend change as major historical events occur. This is a game about the relationship between what a culture experiences, and how they represent that in the stories they tell each other.

Create the Setting

Your Culture Concept

You'll be creating a culture to follow through five generations. For the purposes of this game, a culture is defined as any group of people living in proximity who are united by something: that could be a political boundary, an ideology, shared ancestry, a religion, or anything else you can think of to bind a society together. Proximity could mean physical proximity, or a group who is linked closely by means of technology that allows them to communicate despite their physical distance.

Choose a time period/setting and an aesthetic for your culture. You can set it anywhere, in any kind of setting you can think of. It could be a real-world time period, a culture in a distant galaxy far in the future, or a fantasy or alternate history setting. Talk with the players at the table to find something everyone is interested in. Decide what unites your culture. Give your culture a name. Write the name and concept down on an index card, called your culture card.

Examples of a culture concept include the Kingdom of Wessex in Viking era England, the members of a fleet of starships searching for a new home, and a city-state in a fantasy-inspired world.

Develop the Culture

Answer the following questions about your culture, and write the answers down on your culture card. Interpret these questions as broadly as you want:

What does your culture believe?

What does your culture value?

What law does your culture have?

What problem does your culture face?

Example: Culture

Xaxis:

A new colony on an unnamed harsh planet, set in the far future.

We believe that one among us will step forward, and change the landscape of this planet to make it more suited to life.

We value those who respect the planet and are communally minding, sharing work equally

Our law is that anyone who violates the planet must leave it: a one-way trip.

Our problem is that the conditions on the planet are getting worse, not better.

Create the Legend

Seeding the Legend

Ask a question about an aspect of your culture that everyone at the table is interested in exploring. You'll be creating a legend that explains what your people think about this aspect. You might choose to focus on something that your culture believes in and create a religious story. You could choose to explore a creature or monster they believe, why they value something that they do, or explain why they have the problems that they do.

Here are some example questions to get started:

Why does the monster in the forest exist?

How did the sacred mountain come to be?

Who is the ancient hero, Gwynndaen?

Where is our ancestral home planet, that we search for?

Why is it righteous for us to strive for perfection in battle?

Use this question to set the focus of what your legend will be. Myths and legends are often used to explain something about a culture.

Create the Legend

Once you have the focus of your legend, it's time to actually create the story. You'll be summarizing it on index cards, but feel free to flesh out the full story at the table.

On each index card, write down a short sentence that describes part of the story. These are called story beats. Keep these brief, and treat them like a bullet points version of the story. If your story is about a hero's defeat of a monster, you don't need to write down every detail of the battle, just say that the hero slew the monster with a magic sword. The legend of King Arthur becoming king might look like this, in this format:

Arthur is a young boy adopted by an English lord

Arthur meets Merlin the wizard

Arthur gets his education from Merlin by being turned into animals

At a tournament, Arthur pulls a sword out of a stone, fulfilling a prophecy

Arthur becomes king of England, in accordance with the prophecy

So in this case you'd have five index cards, each with one of these sentences written on them.

Create the Timeline

Arrange these index cards in chronological order on the table where everyone can see them, so that they tell the legend from left to right. This is your legend's timeline.



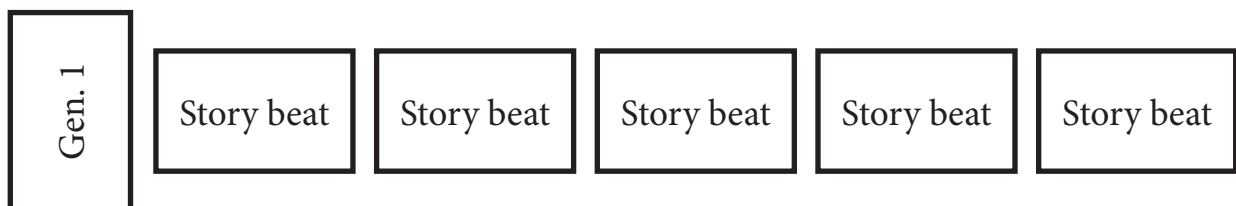
Over the course of the game you'll be altering this timeline and the contents in it, as your culture experiences different historic events.

Playing the Game

Establishing the Generations

Apotheosis takes place over five generations of your culture's history. Decide how long you want each generation to be: you could just as easily call them ages, epochs, or something much shorter. Choose a length that makes sense for your community: if you're creating a folk tale, that might change every few decades as the story changes when it's passed on to children. A religious story written down in sacred texts might change every thousand years. An urban legend on the internet might change every month, or even quicker.

Start by writing "Generation 1" (or whatever other term you choose to use) on an index card. Place it at the beginning of your timeline, perpendicular to the other index cards to help you tell it apart from the others. This is called the generation card.



At the start of each generation, as a table you'll choose one big event that defines the generation. This is an event that effects the culture directly. Next you'll decide how this event impacts the legend that your culture tells.

Collaborate to choose a historical event that everyone at the table is interested in. Pick something that will have a big impact on the culture. The scale of this event will depend on the scale of your culture, and the length of your generation. Take a look at some examples below.

For a game:

Drawing from real history:

About an internet urban legend:

About a sci-fi setting:

The event might be:

Vikings invade England

The story hits cable news

The fleet finds a habitable world

Write the event down on the generation card. Talk about how that event brought some kind of change to the culture: what's different now? Get every player's input.

For future generations, you'll make a new generation card, numbering them in order, with the new historical event defining that generation written below it. Place the new generation cards on top of the previous ones, creating a stack. You can look at the previous ones at any time, just make sure they remain in the right order: with generation 1 on the bottom, and the newest generation on the top.

Telling a Story Through the Generations

The historical event for each generation tells the broad strokes of the story of your culture. Think of these events as a chance to give that narrative some shape. Spend a few minutes thinking about what kind of story you want to tell about this culture. You can take that in any direction that players find interesting.

You might tell the story of a small culture that grows, until something foreshadows doom, and then doom comes to pass: your legend at the end of your game is all that remains of your culture. Or you might tell the story of an empire that becomes mighty and prosperous, that endures, along with the legend you have at the end of the game.

Here's how the historical events for those two examples might look:

Example: The Township of Wey

1. Discovery of the gold mine that makes us prosperous
2. Creation of the Wey Trading Consortium
3. Creature in the mine is awakened by the miners
4. Death of Robert, famed monster hunter
5. Destruction of the town by the creature, survivors flee

Example: Empire of the Silver Path

1. Birth of the Holy Emperor
2. Holy Emperor takes the throne
3. Successful conquest of neighboring kingdoms
4. Holy Emperor achieves immortality
5. Manifest destiny: the Empire controls the whole continent

These are very different story arcs for a culture to take, and both directions are completely viable. It's best to have an idea of where you might like to go, or at least a concept for the story at the beginning. There's no requirement to stick to that plan if something more interesting presents itself. You could also just provide five different snapshots of different periods in the life of your culture, without tying it to a larger narrative if you prefer.

Here are some general story arcs you might use:

Culture grows until tragedy befalls and they are destroyed

Culture begins small, grows into a huge power

Culture starts strong, gets into trouble, and recovers

Powerful in the beginning, slowly loses everything

Despite its struggles to change, things stay the same

Player Actions

With your actions, you'll make changes to the legend itself. Each player will take one action per generation (if you're playing a 2-player game, each player takes two actions per generation). These actions represent what happens to legends, myths, folk tales, and stories over time: they change as the people in a culture change, responding to events. They take on new life. Parts get left behind, or misunderstood, or new aspects rise to give new meanings to events. Choose who will go first, and have play proceed clockwise. Players have four actions available:

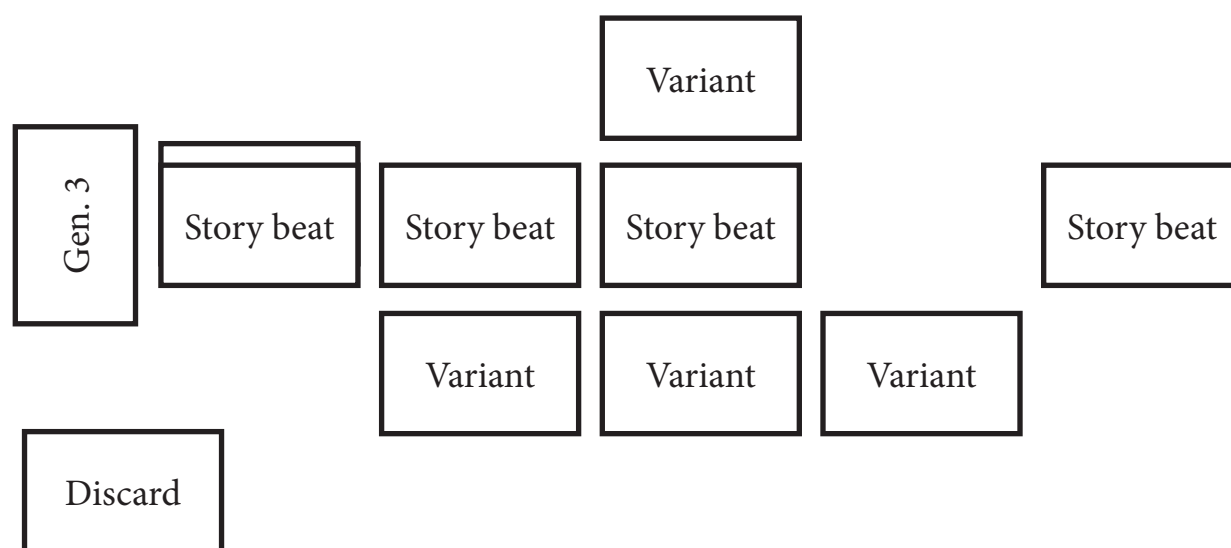
REMOVE: Part of the legend is forgotten. Remove an index card from the timeline, and place it in a discard pile below the generation card. Narrate how that part of the legend has been forgotten or abandoned. Why don't people tell this part anymore? Maybe the clay tablets with that part of the legend written on them were broken, and people simply forgot in time. Leave the space in the timeline rather than moving index cards to fill the gap.

CHANGE: Part of the legend has changed. Write the new version of a story beat on an index card and place it on top of the part of the legend you're changing. If you prefer, splay the cards slightly so you can see that there's a previous version underneath. Narrate why this part of the legend has changed. Maybe when your elven culture was invaded by humans, ideas mingled, and your legend changed. Try to keep the new story beat consistent with the rest of the story.

SPLINTER: A subgroup within the culture starts telling a different version of the legend. Write a variant of one story beat on an index card, and place it above or below the original version. For each new splintering, start a new row. Cards on the same row are considered part of the same variant. Cards on these rows are called splinter versions. Narrate who this subgroup is, and why they have started telling their own version. Maybe their values are a little different than the rest of your culture, and they've adapted a hero's actions to fit their value system. Cards in splinter versions can be affected just like any other, in the dominant version.

PROPAGATE: New aspects of the legend emerge. Write down a new story beat on an index card, and add it to the timeline somewhere where it makes sense. Move index cards as needed to fit it in. You can add this either to the dominant version, or to one of the splinter versions. Narrate why this new part of the story has come into being. Maybe trade with a nearby culture has brought in new values, and the legend starts to reflect those. If a variant timeline grows longer than the original, that is now the dominant version. If it does, narrate how that subgroup has grown to become the cultural center.

In the middle of play, your setup might look like this:



Ending the Game

The Fate of Your Culture

After you've concluded five generations, the game is over. The legend you have after the last action of the fifth generation is the version that endures, regardless of whether your civilization survived or not.

Look over the final version of your legend. Flesh it out a little. Make sure you know what the legend means. If you like, write it down somewhere! Take a minute and think about where the legend started, and where it is now. Look at everything that was removed or forgotten, and all the versions that changed over the generations.

Spend a few minutes talking about the fate of your culture. The historical events will tell the broad strokes, but think about what happened to them after the last event. Was that culture destroyed? Did it change until it became unrecognizable? How did that fate come about, and how did the legend survive? Maybe the culture survived and people wrote the legend down, and retell it to this day. Maybe archaeologists uncover tablets with the legend, like the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Above all else, create a story that you care about. Bend the rules if you need to, they're just a starting point. Tell the story you want to tell, together.