

the irresistable madness of wine and gods

BACCHANAL

a roleplaying game for adults
by M. Paul Buja



It is late summer in Puteoli, south of Rome, 61 A.D., when the city finds itself unexpectedly playing host to the god Bacchus. Caught up in the madness of wine, the citizens throw off their togas and mingle as equals with slaves and foreigners in a debased fervor. And your own plans for a hasty departure are lost to this decadence that separates you from the companion with whom you would travel.

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AN EVENING OF DEBAUCHERY

Bacchanal is two or three hours of GM-less roleplaying for two to six players. Characters are non-residents of Puteoli fleeing accusations of infractions against the Empire. Gameplay follows the characters through events of wine, debauchery, and the cruel sporting of gods, as they struggle to evade soldiers, and accusers, and reunite with a companion from whom they have been separated.

SUMMER IN PUTEOLI

Puteoli is the greatest commercial port in Italy. It boasts a commodius harbor, and though a hundred and seventy weary miles from Rome, is agreeably positioned along the Appian Way. Puteoli enjoys cool breezes from the Tyrrhenian Sea, and the surrounding landscape is lush. The sulphurous hot baths are a popular attraction, widely understood to have curative effects, and many wealthy Romans have expensive villas here.

But always when the air stills in the late summer the heat drives the stinging flies into the comparative coolness of the wooded hills, bringing discomfort and dis-ease into the demesne of the Lord of the Vine. Except this year he came down from the hills.

ILLI IMPERI

When the gods choose to disguise their natures and come among men, it is never with any intention to spare us from the real harm of divine contact. As mortal as they may seem to our eyes, their moods and desires still project outward to overwhelm our own emotions, and we are swept up by their imaginations like players in a drama not of our own making. We are their fun. And we are pawns in their politics.

Bacchus has come among the people of Puteoli, as a young man with wild hair and a dangerous grin, seeking the madness of wine and lascivious sexual pleasures. He brings with him several carnally deranged satyrs.

Venus, also, has come to Puteoli, drawn by the excitement of adulterous liaisons and the open sexual promiscuity which has overtaken the city, and with sympathy as well to the frustrations of loves harmed by the wild events of the bacchanal.

Pluto, too, is among the people, as a large, bearded man with menacing eyes. He comes in a cruel mood, with an interest in the theatre of the most base crimes of men.

And Minerva as well, offended by mindless thrill-driven brutality and out of anger at crimes of rapine against women.

PREPARING FOR PLAY

Assemble Materials

- A wine glass for each player
- A cheese tray
- A purple d8, representing Bacchus
- A black d8, representing Pluto
- A red d8, just one, representing the Accuser
- A quantity of brown d8's equal to half the number of players (round up), representing Satyrs
- A quantity of gold d8's equal to half the number of players (round up), representing Soldiers
- A metallic silver d6, representing Minerva
- A white d6, just one, representing the Companion
- A quantity of purple d6's equal to eight times the number of players, representing Wine
- A pearlescent white d4, representing Venus

Create Characters

There is no character sheet. To prepare for play, you need a name for your character, and you need to form some ideas about the character's situation.

Specifically, who has leveled the accusations of an infraction against the Empire, and what is the nature of the infraction? And from whom were you recently separated. Both your character's Accuser and Companion are NPCs that you conceive and express through play. But you should conceptualize them in an open conversation as players, in which you take and offer suggestions to each other about characters, Accusers, and Companions.

- I. Philip describes his character thoughts to the other players. "His name is Leviticus. He's accused of helping a slave escape. The slave's name is Josephus. But I'm stumped on the Accuser. I'm wanting something more interesting than an angry slave-owner." "How about the slave-owner's money manager guy? A slave is a financial asset." "Beautiful!...um...his name is Septimus."¹

Put all the dice on the cheese tray, and position it within easy reach of all players.

Then, each player take a wine glass and five Wine dice. Roll the dice and sum the result.² In order from lowest to highest, go around the room, each player selecting a non-Wine die from the cheese tray, other than the Companion, and placing it in the glass of another player. And then do it once more, in the same order, so every player ends up with two non-Wine dice assigned to them.³ And then finally put your five Wine dice into your glass with the two non-Wine dice. The Companion, and the rest of the Wine and non-Wine dice remain for now on the cheese tray.

IN MEDIAS RES

Before any dice are rolled, players go once around the room, looking to the dice in their wine glasses for inspiration and framing the starting

¹ An extended example of play from one player's perspective can be constructed by reading the indented examples in order of the prepended grey Roman numerals.

² And yes, this will be the only time Thoht makes an appearance in the game.

³ You may not place a second Soldier into the glass of a player who already has one.

circumstances for their characters.⁴ Start this with the player who has Bacchus in his glass, and proceed counter-clockwise. If no player has Bacchus, start with the player with the most satyrs in his glass. If this is still inconclusive, start with the player who has himself led the most hedonistic life.

- II. Philip looks to the dice in his glass, and then describes a scene in a private residence. The wife of the house has been subsumed by the spirit of Venus. She's engaged in adulterous sexual congress with a Roman soldier. Leviticus is a boy, thirteen. He's naked, seated against the wall by the head of the bed, with a mostly empty wineskin in his lap, watching the sex with glassy, drunken eyes.

SCENE RESOLUTION

Bacchanal is a game of narrating. On your turn, you roll the dice in your wine glass, which represent various characters, gods, Accusers, Companions, and Wine. The high die or high tie in your roll tells you variously to add or remove dice from your glass, and informs how you describe what transpires.⁵ Begin with the player who went first in framing his character's starting scene, and proceed counter-clockwise.

If a rule instructs you to add a specific die to your glass, and it is not available on the tray, claim it from the glass of the player who does have it.⁶

You may be apprehended by Soldiers, but if you can just reunite with your Companion you'll emerge together from the influence of the bacchanal and the threat of imminent arrest.

⁴ The whole of Puteoli is swept up in the drama and debauchery of the bacchanal. So definitely use locations to deliver power to your scene framing. Some to consider: the Flavian Amphitheater, the sulphurous hot baths, the "Temple of Serapis", which is a market court, the acropolis, and the necropolis (yikes!).

⁵ Check out the Fortune-at-the-Beginning, baby!

⁶ This rule, and others, will sometimes have you claim a die from the glass of another player. So there will be times you roll dice for a scene lacking one or more non-Wine

This Is Where the Party Is

If your high roll is two or more tied Wine dice, select one of the available non-wine dice and add it to your glass. Narrate the presence of that character into your current location, and the details of a surge in thrills and excitement. If there are no non-Wine dice available on the tray, select one from the glass of another player.

III. Philip rolls his dice: two tied Wine. He selects the Companion die from the tray, adds it to his glass, and then narrates Josephus entering the room, naked, through the shuttered door from the courtyard. The slave is an older Jew. Through the haze of wine, Leviticus realizes he has never before seen a circumcised penis. Josephus joins Venus and the soldier.

VI. Philip rolls: two tied Wine. He adds Venus back to his glass, and he must describe an escalation of debauchery. He describes the passage of time. Josephus sleeps on the bed. Leviticus on the floor, at the base of the wall...until...Venus returns, and awakens him. "Come, boy, learn to love a woman from a goddess," she says.

I Want A New Drug

If your high roll is some other flavor of tie (two or more non-Wine dice tied, or a tie between a combination of Wine and non-Wine dice), remove one of your non-Wine dice to the tray, and narrate how a lack of fun and thrills at the current location precipitated the departure.

IV. Philip rolls his dice: the Soldier tied with a Wine. Philip thinks for a second, removes the Soldier die to the tray, and then describes the soldier getting ill on Venus. "It's hot. He's been drinking for hours. And the exertion now is just too much."

dice that were in your glass at the end of your previous scene. Don't sweat this. At some point you'll probably find yourself narrating a scene that includes a character who no longer factors mechanically in the outcome. God, soldier, satyr, accuser, companion, you can have the character stay, or leave, or whatever you wish, within the confines of what the dice say must happen.

And Venus is outraged. “Get out of here you pig!” She kicks him out through the shuttered doors.

- V. Philip rolls: a tie between the Companion and a Wine. Philip must remove either the Companion, or Venus. He puts the goddess on the tray, and dramatizes her ongoing ire: “You would continue? I’m filthy! — I need a bath.” She storms out to the courtyard. Josephus, deflated, rolls onto his back. Leviticus hands him the wineskin.

Pluto⁷

If Pluto is the high die, add a Soldier die to your glass. And describe how the scene resolves itself with the commission of a crime.⁸ You are implicated, whether you participated or not. Change of scene.⁹ Remove Pluto to the tray. If there is no Soldier available on the tray, select one from the glass of another player.

Dan rolls Pluto high. Petrus is at the necropolis, running madly between couples and tombs in an effort to evade the accuser pursuing him. And then he crashes full into a large, dark, bearded man. “You always have a choice,” the man says. “The lowest animal knows this. You can be weak, and flee...or you can fight.” He hands Petrus a bronze dagger.

And as the gasping accuser, Junius, bursts among them, with barely the strength left to stand, Petrus coldly guts him.¹⁰

⁷ When one of the gods is your high die, you must incorporate an action that at least suggests the hand of that god in the events you narrate.

⁸ Murders are fun, but it’s easy for players to get in the rut of describing murder after bloody murder. It gets old. The interests of drama demand that you consider other options. Not a bloody murder, but a planned, secret murder. Not a butchery with an edged weapon, but a poisoning. And not a murder at all, but blackmail, or bearing false witness, or a crime of counterfeit seals, false evidences, or hoax discoveries.

⁹ You cannot narrate a change of scene for your character until the dice say that you can.

¹⁰ Note that Dan doesn’t say that Junius is dead. He may need to narrate Junius in subsequent scenes, so he has to leave the man’s fate unresolved.

Venus

If Venus is the high die, put the Companion die into your glass. Change of scene. Describe how a mysterious and attractive woman or lovely boy leads you to a new location where your Companion is present. Remove Venus to the tray.

Wine

If Wine is the high die, you cannot change location. Describe an escalation of decadence¹¹ at the current location. Remove Bacchus to the tray.

Satyrs

If a Satyr is your high die, add a Wine to your glass. Describe a change of scene, and sexual decadence at the new location. If there are no Wine dice available on the tray, select one from the glass of another player.

Dan's character, Petrus, is knowing fellatio for the first time with another man, on a table in a tavern. Dan rolls Satyr high, and describes the lusty Satyr rising just enough from the floor behind the bar to announce, "Now, everyone, find a new partner!" The man, a senator named Darius, hands Petrus his goblet of wine, kisses him, and says, "If you're ever in Rome..."

Dan adds a Wine to his glass. And Petrus heads upstairs, toward the squeals of the Senator's nubile daughter and her young friend.

Bacchus

If Bacchus is your high die, no change of scene. Add a Wine to your glass and describe an escalation of decadence at the current location. Bacchus remains with you.

¹¹ Historical accounts have the wine-crazed followers of Bacchus tearing apart live animals with their hands and teeth. But know that you do a disservice to your game session if you enslave its drama to what you know of Roman history and mythology. Instead, narrate "decadence" to mean whatever you personally think it means.

Dan rolls Bacchus high. Petrus, who never made it as far as the Senator's daughter, realizes... "The woman I'm enjoying is my cousin Philia." Dan adds a Wine to his glass.

Accuser

If your Accuser is the high die, describe him confronting you, and reveal or elaborate upon your crime. Change of scene. And add a Soldier to your glass.

Dan rolls Accuser high.¹² He narrates Petrus being pulled from coitus by a man named Junius. "You! Where is my daughter?" screams the older man. "You took her virginity the day before she was to wed Antonius!" Petrus throws the plate of smoked fish at the man and flees through the window. Dan adds a Soldier die to his glass.

Soldier

If a Soldier is your high die, describe your character's apprehension. If you have the Accuser, remove him to the tray. Change of scene. And your next scene is your last.

On your last scene, roll everything remaining in your glass, except for the Wine, and narrate the outcome. Only if Venus or your Companion is the high die do you survive this final scene.

Removing his Wine to the tray, Dan is left with nothing but the Soldier. He rolls anyway. And it comes up a 2, which he uses as inspiration for his narration. "Neglect," says Dan. He describes Petrus' abuse at the hands of his gaolers, resulting in injury...and death from a tetanus infection.

¹² Dan actually put the Accuser into his own glass after rolling two tied Wine on a previous scene. He'd had several turns with Wine high and no scene change, and his creative ability to continually escalate the decadance at the current location was getting tapped out. The Accuser was the one available die on the cheese tray that offered a possible scene change.

Companion

If your Companion is your high die, describe your flight from Puteoli. This is your final scene. Return all your dice to the tray.

VII. Philip rolls: the Companion is his high die (so this is his last scene). Leviticus wakes, more exposed than not by the imperfect covering of a twisted silk sheet, to the noisy return of the husband of the house from his own decadent exploits. The man doesn't even notice him. Leviticus rises, and smiling, skin yet tingling from Venus' divine caress, quietly proceeds through the house to the room where Josephus yet sleeps. "Come on, let's go."

Minerva

If Minerva is your high die, narrate what's up with your companion. You've had a vision. And remove Minerva to the tray.

If Minerva is in your roll, and she's not the high die, but she's tied with one or more Wine, remove the Wine to the tray. She is a sobering presence. If she's not tied with any Wine, add a Wine and remove Minerva; you're caught up in the bacchanal, and wholly oblivious to her influence.

The Cup Runneth Dry

On your turn you can remove one Wine to the tray by incorporating into the narration an NPC you've not previously had in one of your scenes.¹⁵

A Beam In the Eye of God

If you have Minerva, and someone narrates a particularly excessive and decadent sequence of events, you can, if you want, gift them with Minerva, as a recognition that the goddess would note and respond to the offense.

¹⁵ So, an NPC who was created by another player, and more specifically, one who is not associated with a die (i.e. no soldiers, satyrs, accusers, gods, etc.)

DESIGN NOTES

Bacchanal was conceived and written for the Iron Game Chef (www.game-chef.com) design contest in May, 2005. It fulfills contest requirements by being set in a historical period, by using wine, accuser, and companion as ingredients, and by not having a character sheet. It also has a resolution mechanic that uses colors.

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