



THE ART OF WORLD BUILDING

LEARN HOW TO: CREATE GODS AND PANTHEONS

EPISODE: 4, PART 2

WITH RANDY ELLEFSON

Intro

Hello and welcome to *The Art of World Building Podcast*, episode number four, part two. Today's we continue our discussion of creating gods. We talk about whether they are good, evil, or neutral, and what this really means. We also discuss titles, symbols, patronage, reputation, and what items a god might have created and which could fall into the wrong hands. This material and more is discussed in Chapter 2 of [Creating Life](#), volume 1 in *The Art of World Building* book series.

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Gods and Alignment

Let's continue our discussion of how to create gods. If you've ever played role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, you're probably very familiar with the concept of alignment, such as good, evil, or neutral. Well that's an oversimplified way of looking at people, this is one way to organize our deities. Unless we're trying to create an imbalanced pantheon, where we have a bunch of evil gods and almost no good gods, we might want to strive for more balance.

While good and evil are fairly easy to understand, the concept of neutral might need a little more examination. Does this simply mean that a god is not good or evil, or does it mean that this god has chosen a pacifist position? Does it mean that they never interfere in the lives of those who live on the planet? A god who never does anything is arguably not particularly interesting. This might be the primary reason that some on Earth have lost interest in God.

Wouldn't it be more interesting if He was still putting in an obvious appearance that none of us could deny? Certainly, more people would believe in God if we had proof that He exists. Obviously, some

people will assume that various things are proof of God, but some of us don't except that, so this leaves a lot of room for interpretation, and of course, this causes various problems.

Using this as an example, it is apparent that a pacifist god might have trouble attracting more followers. Some people might even lose their faith because there is not an answer to their prayers. If we decide that a god is neutral and a pacifist, we might also decide that they have fewer followers and priests.

Something we should also consider is that gods who are evil might not enjoy being called that. They may have a worldview that essentially rationalizes their outlook. For example, a god of domination may generally believe that people need to be ruled. However, their followers might justify abuses of tyranny based on this. As a result, others might consider the god evil whether god himself may chafe at this characterization. In fact, it might not be wise to tell a god to their face, if you happen to be one of them, that they are evil.

Personally, I avoid the words "good" and "evil" in my stories because I feel like it's an oversimplification of the way people and gods are. You have to consider the mindset of your intended audience. There's an idea for younger people enjoy this simplification of good versus evil, but that more sophisticated people might roll their eyes at that characterization. No one can tell you which approach is right. Personally, I try to avoid this by using words such as benevolent, kinder, or helpful instead of good, and for evil I tend to use words like nefarious, sinister, or feared. These get the point across without talking down to the audience.

More Resources

Let's take a quick break here and talk about where you can get more useful world building resources. [Artofworldbuilding.com](http://artofworldbuilding.com) has most of what you need. This includes links to more podcasts like this one. You can also find more information on all three volumes of *The Art of World Building* series. Much of the content of those books is available on the website for free.

And the thing that you might find most useful is that by signing up for the newsletter, you can download the free templates that are included with each volume of *The Art of World Building* series, whether you have bought the books or not. All you need to do is join the newsletter. You can do this by going to artofworldbuilding.com/newsletter. Sign up today and you will get your free templates, and you will never miss an update about what is happening in the great world of world building.

Identifying Gods

While just about every god will have a name, there are other ways of identifying them. This includes their title, their patronage, and the symbol. Example titles would be "God of Despair," "The Weeping Gods," or maybe even "The Lord of Despair." These are basically nicknames or informal titles that one might use to give an impression of what the god really cares about.

It can be tempting to give a single god multiple nicknames, but when we are writing about them in a story, we might want to use only a single one per story. I have found that using multiple names is problematic because people get a little bit confused. In general, it's a good idea to keep things simple. If you invent multiple nicknames, I suggest using the one that most appropriately applies to the situation you are describing in that story.

Gods are often the patron of some activity that people undertake. This can be a profession such as hunters or blacksmiths, or it can be something a little more general like children or even lovers. The way to choose who that god patronizes is to first look at their attributes. A god of war will choose to support warriors or maybe even knights. This is how you can use the characteristics of the gods and further develop the idea of who they are and who worships them. A god of war might patronage all warriors or be a little more specific and only focus on the knights.

Inventing symbols for our gods often very useful. These can be put onto armor, buildings, ships, space stations, uniforms, or even worn as talismans, or in rare cases, even branded into someone's flesh. The people of our world will encounter the symbols, and this is an easy way to characterize a location or person. Someone wearing the symbol of the god of war will make it clear that they're not exactly very peaceful. However, that god could also be the god of courage.

This is one way that the symbol may be misleading. One person might decide that this person is more like and not be peaceful, while another person might see the symbol and decide the individual is very courageous or at least interested in bravery. This is one way that we can use something as simple as a symbol as a way to create misunderstanding among characters. There is a tendency for people to jump to conclusions instead of asking what something really means.

This is why it's also important for each god to have a reputation. We'll talk more about that after this short period.

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Interaction

Let's resume talking about reputation and the gods and how they interact with each other in the world.

The gods may have rules about this. Maybe they've reached an agreement that they are not to interfere with the lives of people. Why would they do this? Well, from our standpoint, if the gods can keep intervening, well then it's Susie them to just fix the problem that our characters are having. This is

considered to be too convenient and generally is bad storytelling form. The people should be able to solve a problem by themselves, maybe with a little bit of help from the gods, such as in healing, but not with a god simply swoop in and solve everything for everybody. Such a scenario is considered very unsatisfying for the audience. It's also a little too convenient for an author or storyteller to get themselves out of a jam because they didn't plan a story.

While the gods may have a rule about not intervening with everyone, not all the gods are going to be okay with this, or they might agree and they might decide not to follow through. There will be times when they make exceptions. In general, we may decide that it is the evil gods who decide to intervene when they are not supposed to. After all, evil gods are not considered to be particularly law-abiding, even when the other gods of the ones who invented the law.

Some of these gods might find it entertaining that they are doing things behind the backs of the other gods. Or they might be doing something for a more specific purpose, such as helping their followers to beat someone who is an enemy of another god. These gods may engage in a kind of proxy war. This means that they may help some of their followers overthrow the followers of another god whom they do not get along with. This might be done for no other reason than to simply entertain themselves.

On the other hand, if a god draws power based on the number of worshipers that have, then it might be in their best interests to make a show of strength so that they can gain more worshipers and therefore more power. And by extension, they may defeat and lower the power of another god.

A related question is whether the gods punish anyone who breaks the law. If there is no punishment, then these laws really have no binding effect on anyone. The result might be that the gods are interfering much more than they have agreed. This certainly implies that there should be some sort of punishment. The question then becomes how do the gods punish one of their own?

An obvious solution is that the god loses the ability to influence their followers. What if a god is punished and none of the priests who call upon the god to heal people can reach the god? That means that anyone they are trying to heal cannot be healed. Furthermore, the influence of that god might be severely restricted. This might result in lost followers. For example, if priests are calling on someone to heal an individual and the god does not answer because they can't, because they are being punished, then this may cause a loss of faith. Presumably, a god would want to avoid such an outcome. This is a pretty good punishment to enact upon them for disobeying the rules that the gods set for themselves.

Do the gods end up on trial? Do they get physically imprisoned somewhere? If so, where might that be? This is an interesting option because their followers might try to free the god. Maybe the god is put to sleep. If so, the question arises, how does one wake that god? Is there a special magic item or technology that will do so? This seems like a ripe story idea.

We can have some characters who are upset that their god was punished for doing something that they may have caused, such as calling on the god to do something and the god answers, and now their god has been punished. Do they feel a responsibility to undo this and rescue the god? What if the god is very happy with them for having done so? Maybe they dream of a reward of some kind. Or maybe they just want their god back and life to return to normal. This sounds like a story idea waiting to happen.

This is one way we can invent deities and rules that produce stories. Isn't it better than simply announcing something in exposition? It's always better to tell a story that reveals aspects of our world than to simply tell the audience.

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When the Gods Punish

While we're on the subject of punishment, what do the gods do to their species when those species have misbehaved? Death is the obvious answer, albeit not a particularly interesting one. After all, once the character is dead, that's the end. Keeping them alive offers opportunities for additional suffering and the possibility that they can be rescued by others.

A nasty afterlife is another way to go. Volume 3, *Cultures and Beyond*, will discuss creating an afterlife in more detail. But an afterlife is a great place to put this person so that they can be rescued. Or they can just suffer there for eternity. We can also think of more interesting ways of punishing someone, such as removing magical talent, wizard. We might also decide that someone in a technological setting is no longer able to manipulate that technology. This makes little more sense if that technology is biologically based, such as using a fingerprint scanner or an eye scanner, or any sort of biological mechanism that allows them to operate machinery.

Then there's the question of how long this punishment lasts. Something permanent is obviously worse but if the person is allowed to wander the world or the universe with this restriction, then this is going to put them into situations that might be uncomfortable for them. They might have always relied on this supernatural power or a technological skill and no longer have this. Imagine the sorts of problems that will result when they go to use this ability and belatedly realize they don't have it anymore. They will already know this, but in the heat of the moment, they might just forget that they can't do it anymore.

Then there's the question of why someone ends up being punished by the gods in the first place. What sorts of crimes must one commit to get the attention of a god? Destroying one of the temples seems like an obvious choice. This is a better choice than someone taking the name of the god in vain because so many people are going to do that but the gods would be awfully busy punching everyone who did this. The more serious the crime, the more likely this will attract divine punishment.

Review

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What Have the Gods Created?

Another good subject when inventing gods is to decide on what they have created. The first choice is, of course, that they have created the world and all of its inhabitants. This is a good choice and we can decide the different groups of gods created different species or races. This makes it easier for us to distinguish between the species. After all, not all of them will be worshipping the same gods.

We can also decide that each god has created various items that they typically have in their position. The great thing about these items is that they can fall into the wrong hands. If an item has a supernatural power and then the species get a hold of it, then they might be able to do things that no mortal should be able to do.

There worst case example would be an item that has the ability to create life. Now we have a species, or a member of that species, who has control of this and is doing this without approval or authorization. And the next thing you know, they might have created a monster, for example. There are less significant things that we can do that also provide opportunities for fun.

Maybe the god of greed has a goblet that allows him to drink without ever getting drunk, and the next thing you know, someone on the planet has this. The goddess of love might have an item that allows people to fall in love with her, and once someone has this, that person is able to have one sexual conquest after another. This sound like something that could cause a lot of problems and also be a fairly entertaining story. This is especially true when that object is suddenly returned to the god and the next thing you know that person has seduced people who are now very upset with him.

With some imagination and some humor, we can create some very interesting scenarios. I recommend looking at each of the gods you have created, and once you have decided on their personal characteristics, making up a list of magic items that they have in their possession. These items should have something to do with the attributes of this god and the matters that concern them. Typically, each of these items will be associated with that god. They can also be the symbol for the god.

This brings up another point that when we are inventing our deities, we sometimes need to work on different aspects of them before we come up with something else for another area of the god. We might not be able to think of a symbol and to reinvent some of the items that this god has invented first. This underscores another point, that it can take a lot of time to develop a deity that is well-rounded, so don't worry too much about it if you don't have something to decide on.

If you join *The Art of World Building* newsletter, you can download a template for how to create a god. This is basically a fill in the blanks form. In looking at something like this, we may not be able to decide what we want to do, but that's okay. You can always come back later and add more detail or fill out something that we haven't had an idea on.

Where to Start? Attributes

We're going to conclude our discussion of how to create gods by talking about where to start. One approach is to start with a list of attributes for which we might want gods. Examples would include love or war. Once this is decided, you can also start grouping attributes. For example, the goddess of love might also be the goddess of birth or passion. The god of war might also be the god of cunning. The reason to have these additional attributes is that we can start fleshing out what this God is really concerned about. A single attribute like four is not really indicative.

For example, some people think that war is evil but other people think that it is a necessary means to an end. As a result, some might think it's bad while others think it's okay. If you were to tell a soldier that war is evil, they probably wouldn't appreciate that very much. After all, many of them think they are doing a noble job protecting the country that they love. And this is certainly true.

The point here is that a single attribute like war can be considered evil or good. As a result, we might want to consider flushing out the idea of what this god concerns himself with by adding additional attributes that are an extension of this prime trait.

A similar example is that of birth. The god of innocence might be the god of birth because children are born innocent, but on the other hand, the goddess of passion might be considered the goddess of birth because in theory, passionate love is what leads to childbirth. What we're talking about here is that any particular attribute can be seen as either good or evil. Okay well, maybe not all of them, but many of them can be assigned to one or more gods. What we might want to do is to create this list of primary attributes and invent the gods for these, and then as we think of related attributes, we start assigning them to the gods as we choose.

If I were to create a god of passion, I might think of a set of related attributes that is very different from the set of related attributes that you think of. This is perfectly okay. By doing this, we end up getting a better sense of what this god's personality really is. And the better we sense this, the better we can portray this. This will also give us a better understanding of the mindset of the characters who worship this god or who are opposed to the god.

This also set up some interesting scenarios. For example, someone might be opposed to war but appreciate bravery. If the god of courage is also the god of war, then this might cause a bit of conflict for them. They may respect aspects of the god but not other aspects. Therefore, they might not actually worship that god. Or if they do, they only do so when it seems appropriate to them. This sorted detail can add richness to the world that we are creating and make it seem like a real place with more diverse characters and deities.

Where to Start? Analogues

Another way to begin creating gods is to start with analogues from Earth. In episode two of this podcast, I talked at length about how to create an analogue. In this case, we might want to choose a god from Earth that we enjoy and invent another god of our own invention on that deity.

However, we must be careful with this. If we choose to use Zeus, what am I probably don't want to create a similar god who also lives on a mountain and throws lightning bolts. Everyone's going to immediately recognize this analogue. I talked about this "rule of three" in episode two, the idea being

that we should make at least three major differences between our version of something and the Earth analogue that we based it on.

It can be difficult to create even one god not to mention a pantheon, so using analogues is a good way to start. We can find gods that we like and enjoy the idea of, and use them as a source of inspiration. By mixing and matching ideas from different gods, we can create something new. This convenient shortcut can speed up the process of inventing gods and get us going.

Closing

That's all for today's show. Please remember to rate and review in iTunes. We're going to close out with another song of mine from the album [Now Weaponized!](#) This one is "Crunch Time." Thanks for listening!