

# Mortal Affairs Review Board

by Chance J. Feldstein

Mount Olympus, Summer Solstice, high noon. It's time for this decade's meeting of the board in charge of Earthly business. As expected, some gods and goddesses have shown up, and most had more important things to do. Athena is determined to accomplish more than usual with her limited time. Will the other deities help? Will they cause trouble? Probably both. Gods can be self-centered and capricious. Each considers their favorite things the most important in the universe. Herding these cats is a tough job, but Athena enjoys the challenge. Mostly.

## What you will need:

4-6 players, with two hours available to play

A video conferencing service (e.g. Zoom, Skype, Hangouts), or a table and chairs

A document sharing service (e.g. Google Docs, Dropbox, OneDrive), or paper and a pencil

Optional: Robes to wear. Ares, Artemis, and Athena may also wear armor. Zeus, Hera, and Persephone may wear crowns. Hestia may wear a veil, and Dionysus a wreath.

Optional: A gavel, mallet, or hammer, and a piece of wood for Athena to hit with it



## Ways to Play

On the surface, this game is a lovingly satirical take on the spirit side of modern neo-paganism, in which powerful Greek gods respond to Earthly concerns like mundane board members. Beneath the comedy are layers of tragedy and hope, since some agenda items are about serious real-world issues. At the social, interpersonal level, each character comes with his or her own goal for the meeting, a proposal for one of Athena's agenda items, and some existing relationships, to provide inspiration for roleplay. They also include a theme song, to help get you thinking about their emotions.

If you're pagan or some other type of polytheist, or you're interested in [invocation](#), you can play this game in a ritual way, to connect experientially with a chosen deity. Play with 3-5 members of your existing coven or working group, if you have one, or with a few friends who are interested. Choose characters, as below, and change some of your agenda items to the questions you all want to ask the gods. Begin the ritual by lighting a candle and some incense, such as frankincense, to help get players into a light trance. Call the Muses with this [song](#). Then take turns inviting your chosen god/dess within you, by reading a prayer or poem about them, with the intent of feeling their presence and hearing their voice. (I suggest the Orphic Hymns, available [here](#).) Once everyone feels ready, begin the in-character meeting. After the game ends, thank your deities, bid them farewell, and blow out the candle, to conclude your ritual. You may need to ground yourselves afterwards. I suggest eating something, soaking in a sea salt bath, or standing barefoot on soil or grass for a few minutes.

## Character Creation (15 minutes):

Connect to your video conferencing service, or sit around your table together. Read the first three pages of this game, if you haven't already. Then pick a pre-generated Greek god or goddess from page 4 or 5. (Optional rules for playing deities from other religions are on p. 6.) If your group is playing ritually, you may find that you don't need a character card.

Spend a little time looking up some more about your deity online. Start with Wikipedia or [this site](#). (CW: Some Greek myths mention sexual assault, or other forms of violence.) Ask yourself what makes your deity great. What makes them selfish? How do they view the world? What new item, if any, might they want to add to the meeting agenda?

This is also a good time to pre-negotiate more details about the gods' relationships with each other. Your character card is just a starting point, so feel free to customize, until the board feels like a family.

## Safety Workshop (5 minutes):

Decide together if you want to use the *Serious* or *Whimsical* agenda items (or both), found on page 3. Then take 5 minutes to have a short conversation about [Lines and Veils](#) for the group. Lines are topics that are off limits. Veils are

topics that you can mention briefly, but the game should not dwell on them. Lines and Veils can go in a shared spreadsheet, or on paper in the center of the table.

This game also uses the safety mechanics [X-Card and Open-Door Policy](#). If a difficult topic comes up that you need the group to move away from, make an X with your arms, and say or type “X-Card”. That topic will be considered a new Line, immediately. Finally, you may leave the game or turn off your audio / video at any time, without judgement or blame.

Please play with compassion and kindness for others, and for yourself.

**Gameplay (90 minutes):**

The structure of this game is loosely based on parliamentary procedure; those who wish to strive for additional parliamentary realism may enjoy [this cheat sheet](#). If you need to speak out-of-character during gameplay, put your hand on your head and / or say “out of character”.

As the chair of the board, Athena is also the **facilitator**. She moderates the meeting, and officially, she has the floor unless she calls on someone else. If another character wishes to speak, they should raise their hand and wait for Athena to call on them. In practice, some gods don’t care about this rule, and others may decide to scold them for it.

When you have the floor, you may ask a question or make a comment about the current agenda item. The game continues until the board has decided all agenda items, or until the 90-minute timer runs out. Here are a few parliamentary phrases that you may decide to use, either seriously or passive-aggressively:

Phrase	Surface meaning	Possible subtext	Example
“I move that...”	I want us to vote on this idea	This idea, not some other idea	“I move that we create more cats who live in trees.”
“I bless...” or “I curse...”	I’m using my powers now	Look how powerful I am	“I bless the country of Germany with a bountiful harvest this year.”
“Point of information”	No one seems to know this	Look at me, I’m so smart	“Point of information: that city has been empty for centuries.”
“Point of inquiry”	I have a question	I’m confused or bored	“Point of inquiry: Who was supposed to bring food today?”
“Point of order”	This is the way we should do things	I like to tell people what to do	“Point of order: I was interrupted, so I should get to speak next.”
“Point of general privilege”	Something is urgent that affects all of us	Something is horribly wrong here	“Point of general privilege: raging Titans are headed this way.”
“Point of personal privilege”	Something is urgent that affects only me	My business is more important than yours	“Point of personal privilege: one of my priests is sick. Be right back!”

Some agenda items may be resolved with one motion passed, or several, or sometimes no motions pass. When someone proposes a motion, using an “I move that...” statement, the motion needs the support of a second board member to show it’s worthy of discussion. A motion properly made and seconded may then go to debate, and after debate comes voting. Seconds and votes may use a show of hands, voice roll-call vote, or text chat, depending on player access needs.

Whether or not you use the parliamentary statements above, remember that *your character is in charge of everything that’s italicized on your character card*. Those primary interests are their business, and also what they love most about the world. That’s why each character has veto power over them: the gods do what they want, when it comes to their personal domains. As one example, the board can demand that Aphrodite make two particular mortals fall in love, but only she gets to choose whether or not it will happen. If another god’s veto is a problem, find a way to convince them not to use it.

## Mortal Affairs Review Board Meeting Agenda / Facilitator Script

What's on this page is a rough script for Athena's meeting. *Roleplay it in your own words*, rather than reading verbatim.

**How to begin:** Set a timer for 90 minutes. Then call the meeting to order, and bang your gavel / hammer / mallet (if available, otherwise your fist is fine). Read out loud the current officers of the board:

Chair - Athena

Vice-Chair - Zeus

Secretary - Hermes

Sgt.-at-arms - Ares

Morale Officer - Dionysus

**Censure:** If any of the officers are absent from this board meeting, you may voice your disapproval, disappointment, or judgement of their self-indulgent lifestyle. You just can't rely on gods now, the way you could in ancient times.

**Choose the first agenda item** from whichever set (*Serious*, *Whimsical*, or both) your group picked earlier. After debate and voting, pick another agenda item from the same set, and so on. If you finish debating and voting on all agenda items before the timer runs out, solicit motions for new agenda items from the other characters, or propose one yourself.

### *Serious Agenda Items:*

1. After hundreds of years, paganism and witchcraft are in a resurgence. Even disbelieving mortals spread our names and stories, through their shows, movies, books, comics, and games. What to do with all these interested mortals? We want more followers, but this is a lot of prayers and spells to manage.
2. What to do about climate change: Can the planet be saved? Should we scrap it and start over?
3. Global capitalism seems to be collapsing. Are we interested in helping the humans with this? If so, how?
4. What other things can we do to improve the world? You're all deities with spectacular powers, so think big here, Olympians. Think outside the box. What worked better in the ancient world than it does now?

### *Whimsical Agenda Items:*

5. Does anyone have grievances to air? The one who upset you doesn't have to be at this meeting.
6. Medusa started an Instagram account last week. Now we have hundreds of people who have been turned to stone, all around the world. Crisis or opportunity? How should we handle this?
7. A child with extraordinary potential has been born. Who gets to be their patron and why? What will you do for this child, if you get to be the one to bless them most?
8. The nymphs and the satyrs want us to determine, officially, whose woodland frolicking is more adorable.

**Debate:** When you have the floor, you may use any of the parliamentary phrases on page 2. If there are raised hands, moderate debate by calling on someone. Or you may call for unstructured debate, allowing anyone to speak without being called on. If debate seems to be getting too loud or heated, bang your gavel and call for order to settle things down.

**Motions:** After debate, you may call a vote on proposed motions for the current agenda item. If a motion passes, write it down. When the timer is down to 2 minutes remaining, conclude by thanking everyone and reading all passed motions.

### **Reflection / Processing Workshop (10 minutes):**

After the meeting, take some time to have an optional conversation about your experiences in the game. Discuss some or all of these questions:

What were some of your most intense moments?

What would you like to take home from this game? What do you want to leave behind?

What are some of your thoughts and feelings about the gods, or about paganism?

How are you feeling about the issues discussed in the meeting?

## Characters

The facilitator plays Athena. The remaining 3-5 players may choose any character below.

For an orderly game aimed at beginners, consider: Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Hekate, Hestia

For an environmentally conscious game, consider: Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Persephone, Poseidon

For a melodramatic game, consider: Aphrodite, Ares, Dionysus, Hephaestus, Hera, Hermes, Zeus

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Aphrodite</u></b></p> <p><i>Goddess of beauty, love, passion, pleasure, and procreation</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To be a feast for the senses. You want everyone's eyes on you.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 1):</b> The best way to deal with our new followers is to encourage them to have more children. Then we will have even more!</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> Had an affair with <b>Ares</b> once, but it didn't end well. Married to <b>Hephaestus</b>, but you find him ugly and mean. You haven't forgiven <b>Persephone</b> for trying to steal your lover Adonis.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Apollo</u></b></p> <p><i>God of animal domestication, archery, disease, healing, music, poetry, prophecy, and the Sun; Lord of Muses</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To say beautiful and poignant things in this meeting, to inspire your siblings to be even greater.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 1):</b> Dealing with all our new followers is no problem. We should only pay attention to the best of them, and the rest can fend for themselves.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> You have a complicated relationship with your twin sister <b>Artemis</b>. You think most Olympians have bad taste, but you like <b>Aphrodite</b> because she appreciates beauty.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Ares</u></b></p> <p><i>God of courage, civil order, and the brutality of war</i> <i>Sergeant-at-arms for the board</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To provoke conflict, whether or not the others know you did it. It's fun to watch gods fight.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 6):</b> The extraordinary child will be mine. I will make him a great leader and warrior.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> Has a complicated relationship with <b>Aphrodite</b> - you once had an affair together, but you killed another of her lovers (Adonis). You don't get along with <b>Athena</b> or <b>Artemis</b>, but consider them capable warriors. <b>Hephaestus</b> is a capable weaponsmith, but not much else to you.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Artemis</u></b></p> <p><i>Goddess of hunting, the Moon, the wilderness, and wild animals</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To represent the interests of animals who can't speak, write, or pray.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 2):</b> We should encourage mortals to combat climate change by hunting, gathering, and wildcrafting locally, to reduce their carbon footprint.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> Sometimes you get along well with your twin brother <b>Apollo</b>, and other times not so much. Some of your mortal followers tell you that you might want to get to know <b>Hekate</b> better. You've had a grudge against <b>Hera</b> since the Trojan War.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Athena (Facilitator Character)</u></b></p> <p><i>Goddess of civilization, good advice, heroism, military tactics, pottery, weaving, and wisdom</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To reach the most intelligent possible decision on each of the agenda items. To have an orderly meeting.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 5):</b> Our media presence should be delegated to the Muses. I will deal with Medusa.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> You consider <b>Hermes</b> a capable god, but he can be exasperating to work with. <b>Hestia</b> is a sensible and helpful ally, as is <b>Hera</b> most of the time. <b>Dionysus</b> is a troublemaker and a buffoon. <b>Hephaestus</b> is very skilled, and should not be underestimated.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Demeter</u></b></p> <p><i>Goddess of agriculture, bread, the cycle of life and death, grain, the harvest, and sacred laws &amp; customs</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To hold the board responsible for feeding the hungry worldwide.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 2):</b> We should encourage mortals to combat climate change by growing food at home, supporting local farms, and planting forests.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> You wish you could see your daughter <b>Persephone</b> more often. You're grateful to <b>Hekate</b> for helping to search for her in the past. You will never trust <b>Poseidon</b> again, due to past wrongs.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Dionysus</u></b></p> <p><i>God of frenzy, intoxication, madness, partying, pleasure, vegetation, and wine</i> <i>Morale officer of the board</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To ensure everyone enjoys the meeting. See if you can get them all to make a toast.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 3):</b> We can improve the world by getting both mortals and gods to have more festivals and parties.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> Most of the other gods are sticks in the mud, but <b>Hermes</b> really knows how to have a good time. You try to steer clear of <b>Ares</b>, since his hostility can be a real downer.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Hekate</u></b></p> <p><i>Goddess of crossroads, doorways, herbalism, magic, the Moon, night, street people, the Underworld, and witchcraft</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To represent the interests of mortal witches and street people, many of whom are her allies.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 6):</b> If I am the patron of the talented child, they will become a powerful witch who serves us all.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> As an Underworld goddess, you have good working relationships with both <b>Persephone</b> and <b>Hermes</b>. <b>Demeter</b> owes you a favor from long ago. The other Olympians are fascinating, but you are glad you aren't one of them.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Hephaestus</u></b></p> <p><i>God of fire, craftsmen, metalworking, sculpture, stonemasonry, and volcanoes</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To get through this meeting, without being insulted as usual.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 5):</b> We should cut off Medusa’s head and mount it on a shield. It worked before.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> You’re married to <b>Aphrodite</b>, but she cheats on you, and you know it. One time, you caught your wife with <b>Ares</b>, whom you have disliked ever since. <b>Hera</b> has been more cruel to you than anyone else except <b>Zeus</b>.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Hera</u></b></p> <p><i>Queen of the Olympians Goddess of childbirth, marriage, the sky, the stars, and women</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To become the new Chair or Vice-Chair of this board.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 3):</b> We can improve the world by helping women to be safe, free, and well supported.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> You don’t get along well with your husband <b>Zeus</b>, and not just because he sleeps around. <b>Hestia</b> is a good friend and excellent host. <b>Hephaestus</b> is a freak who doesn’t belong here.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Hermes</u></b></p> <p><i>Herald / Messenger of Zeus and the other gods Guide to the Underworld for the dead (psychopomp) God of astronomy, astrology, athletics, the crossroads, cunning, diplomacy, language, markets, trickery, &amp; travel Secretary of the board (Take notes if desired.)</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To show how clever you are. (And how clever they aren’t.)</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 6):</b> I should be the child’s patron, since I know mortals better than the rest of you.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> As herald, you get along well with all the gods. <b>Apollo</b> and <b>Dionysus</b> are often the most amusing. You also enjoy <b>Hestia</b>’s calming presence.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Hestia</u></b></p> <p><i>Goddess of the the family, fire, hearth, the home, hospitality, and the state</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To keep the peace in the meeting. To get everyone to treat each other “like family should”.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 1):</b> We should encourage pagans to live by the old ways of hospitality, so that they learn from each other instead of calling on us all the time.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> You have great respect for <b>Demeter</b>, in her role as goddess of customs and sacred laws. <b>Artemis</b> strikes you as wild and possibly crazy, but her brother <b>Apollo</b> is rather impressive. <b>Athena</b> is both reliable and trustworthy.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Persephone</u></b></p> <p><i>Emissary from Hades to Olympus Queen of the Underworld, Goddess of spring growth</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To visit with relatives you don’t get to see as often as you’d like. What’s new in their lives?</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 2):</b> We should alter the agenda to make climate change our number 1 priority.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> You love and miss your mother <b>Demeter</b> most of all. You don’t like or trust <b>Poseidon</b>, because you know he harmed your mother in the past. You tried to take <b>Aphrodite</b>’s lover Adonis, in the past. You’re over it, but she might still be upset. You and <b>Hekate</b> work together in the Underworld, and have mutual respect.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Poseidon</u></b></p> <p><i>God of drought, earthquakes, floods, horses, the sea, and storms</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To speak for the seas, and for all life within.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Items 1 &amp; 2):</b> We should use our media presence to spread the message that the gods want mortals to practice good stewardship of land and sea.</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> You and your brother <b>Zeus</b> don’t always see eye to eye, but you’ll always stand together against external threats. You appreciate <b>Dionysus</b> for helping the gods to stay relaxed, but it can be difficult to keep him on topic. You know both <b>Demeter</b> and <b>Persephone</b> hate you. It’s your fault.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><u>Zeus</u></b></p> <p><i>King of the Olympians, and Vice-Chair of the board God of destiny, fate, law, lightning, order, rulership, the sky, and weather</i></p> <p><b>Goal:</b> To be treated like you’re in charge of this meeting, and take responsibility for whatever it does.</p> <p><b>Proposal (Item 5):</b> We should put Medusa in charge of our media presence. How many new believers do you think we got from that stunt of hers?</p> <p><b>Relationships:</b> You have a rocky relationship with your wife <b>Hera</b>, since you often cheat on her with goddesses, nymphs, and mortal women. You have a long-standing rivalry with your brother <b>Poseidon</b>.</p>	

**Gameplay Variation: Some Responsibility, At Last**

Play for 4 hours, with 8-12 people. Double the times on pages 1 to 3. Athena may have some challenges running such a large meeting, but she is delighted that so many gods have taken an interest and shown up (for once).

## Gameplay Variation: More Things in Heaven and Earth...

Some groups may choose to substitute [Norse](#), [Celtic](#), or other deities for the Greek ones included in the game. If your group picks this option, make each character with a **Goal**, a **Proposal** for one of the group agenda items, and at least one or two pre-existing **Relationships**, like the pre-generated characters. You'll also need to alter the agenda items and board officers, to fit your chosen pantheon. This will require some extra time at character creation.

Particularly eclectic or experienced groups may let each player choose any deity, from any time or place (while taking care to avoid [appropriation of closed cultures](#)). This way of playing shifts the board from an internal Greek matter to a more open forum similar to the United Nations, with representatives from many cultures. In this case, Athena can omit the reading of the officers, and instead have each deity introduce themselves and their culture at the beginning of play. For this option, characters do not need to start with any pre-existing **Relationships** with each other, unless they come from the same culture.

Either of these options could mix well with playing ritually, depending on the players involved.

## Inspirations

[Association for the Advancement of Fairy Tale Creatures \(AFC\)](#); [Are You There God? It's Me, The Quarterly Earnings Report](#); *Dragonlance Chronicles* and *Rose of the Prophet* by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman; [Whose Deity Is It Anyway?](#); *Clash of the Titans*; *Sandman* and *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman

## Designer's Note

I was really excited for this year's ingredients. I felt I had a lot to say about minority religious experience, as a queer [Jewish pagan](#) person who's been reading about religion, mythology, and the occult since they were a kid. I didn't have quite as easy a time with the writing process as expected, but the final game seems to be better from it.

I tried to work out a couple of Jewish ideas first. One ultimately felt too angry, and the other too depressing. I was concerned that no one would want to play either game. A discussion with a close friend led me to agree with her that a Jewish experience feels uncomfortable to share with non-Jewish readers. I look forward to finding out whether and how other Jewish designers disagree.

I decided to draw from other religious experiences. When I was in middle school and high school, most local Jewish communities had no real LGBTQ support or outreach, so I looked elsewhere for paths that validated and celebrated my identity. I found that neo-pagan authors and communities were more inclusive and accepting, and often more fun as well. Maybe as a result of that, my practice has been at least as much pagan as Jewish for a while now. And since paganism is open to anyone with the interest, it made an easier game topic than Judaism.

I enjoy the Greek deities in particular, because none of them is perfect and each is awesome in their own way. I'm often pleasantly surprised to see a statue of a Greek god or goddess in a public space, reminding citizens (among other things) that the United States has polytheistic traditions as old and majestic as our Abrahamic ones. I hope this game serves as an easy and fun way to connect with these powerful spirits, for those who feel called to do so, and as a conduit for helpful psychological archetypes.

May this game of Sacred Play delight players, judges, and *theoi* alike.

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