

## Q&A 15 comments summary

**SEAN:** Thank you. That does put it into a different perspective for me. Novas are beings of myth and work better when imagined that way. Aberrant has some nuggets of content and concept that are worth noting or incorporating into other games. The mythology in particular, but as an overall game experience it got caught up in the same BS many vampire games got caught in. At least that was my experience. If anyone else played it, would love to hear their input as well.

- **Me:** "Novas are beings of myth ..." I suggest flipping it 180. That Novas or any other designation of super-powered/superhero/etc live or die on the basis of whether the stories are any good. As I mentioned in the Situation and Story course, that requires touchstones for human experiences/problems no matter how fantastic the other content may be. In my reply to Mark, I mentioned ferocious debates among those whose careers are actually to talk about these things. One of those debates concerns whether critics and scholars call something good because it invokes/is myth, or whether they elevate something to the (high) status of myth because it's good. I tend toward the latter. Batman and Spider-Man include (among much dross) some outstanding content, precisely at the points when the stories address human problems much as readers know and experience them. Notably, in those stories, they often fail rather than triumph. If someone wants to point excitedly toward "myth! myth" when they see that, I suppose they can, especially if they get a PhD out of it.

**MARGARET:** So I phrased my question fairly specifically and a bit puckishly, because- I've never seen anybody do anything with this Arkat-n-Nysalor-n-Gbaji stuff. Not in the newer material, not in old mailing list posts from that late 80s-2000 lacuna in your knowledge, Ron, not anywhere! It's like those other background concepts- the War against War, the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Malkionism, whatever- people might talk about them, but they don't really seem to play them. And it's weird, because you go to a "clan creation questionnaire" in one of several books for playing in Dragon Pass and it has questions about what your clan thought of Arkat and his transformations a thousand years ago, as if that were somehow relevant. I think it is, in one sense- I was just talking with my partner about our game and she mentioned that her character changing from human to non-human "wind child" was directly inspired by Arkat's transition to trolldom. And in the deep background that I and just about everyone have only secondhand or thirdhand, where Greg Stafford wrote a bunch of short stories in the 60s and early 70s that included ones about Arkat, I think that what you probably have are Stafford's particular obsessions during this time period getting embedded within some of the substrate as he recycles various characters from his attempts at prose fiction into the context of this fantasy board game and then roleplaying game, and then they get picked up on and people get well into the sauce of radical transformations of the self. But that's very very speculative. Funny side comment (or maybe it isn't)- the game has jumped to the Lunar Empire while consciously spending minimal time in Dragon Pass- we zipped right from Esrolia to the northern edge of Tarsh with a scene transition. There's definitely a lot of gravity to Dragon Pass and a lot of life in it by comparison with other areas that are ostensibly there for play. It's likely reaching its conclusion soon, so I'll be writing up another, more retrospective post about it. Other funny side comment- I also have no idea where the development of the Arkat stuff that did take place happened- it's clearly present at some point in the mid-90s on the mailing lists but never localized to a particular convention Q&A, and from my survey of totally-legally-obtained 90s zines, it's not originating there either. Maybe it's in the realm of zines and APAs which are now long lost to anyone but the obsessive collectors.

- **Me:** So strange. To my eyes, after Thed, the Arkat-Nysalor-Gbjai content is the next most evocative and productive for play in the whole bag. One can't help but interpret and is in fact forced to, involuntarily ... e.g., I am probably not the only person who thinks he knows who really walked away from the battle at the Tower of Dreams, and I know I "feel" it strongly enough to want that issue, at least, to be part of play, but I also know that someone else could see it totally differently.

**MARK:** Ron, who are some myth and pop culture scholars other than Campbell you'd recommend?

- **Me:** Excellent question. I'll turf it forward to May as its own Q&A so I can do as well as I can, and since the debates can be ferocious, I'll welcome anyone to share in the job. I'll summarize a couple of points here though, over the next few days, so I'm not just dodging.
- **Manu:** Although I don't like the man's politics, on this topic Jordan Peterson's book Maps of Meaning is very much worth reading imho

- **Me:** Here are just some quick thoughts on three different meanings of “myth” which are all applicable regarding what we do. More scholar talk will appear next month.
  1. Widely-applied and accepted falsehood I probably don’t have to explain this particularly, e.g., the myth of original races, the myth of American Exceptionalism, or to keep it in popular culture, the myth of the seal of the confessional (useful in stories; doesn’t work like that in reality and never has). For our purposes, it’s relevant when it takes on social power: investing in things, being included or excluded. Ninja, for example: no matter how fictional or recent their concept-as-a-whole may be, no matter how much someone may say they “know that,” they typically accept and even apply the spurious history more than they realize. Furthermore, the investment and the acceptance of content (beyond “just for fun”) are both highly socialized, as they are reinforced throughout a given social organization, formal or informal, and used as keys to be included in such organizations.
  2. Recognizable terms, characters, plot points, and ideas – in this, “myth” means content from an older culture that we can spot showing up today. Here are three different kinds, i.e., it’s not a progression.
    - Ancient details are imported into modern media products with little or no content [Ialdabaoth in Super Robot Fighter, The Mighty Thor in Marvel Comics]; a lot of the time it’s exoticism, orientalism, IP strategy, pretense, bullshit, or less judgy, “just for fun.” I’m not talking about this so much, except in those cases when something begins like this and sooner-or-later qualifies for some of the categories below.
    - Historical throughline of something’s presence, name, concept, e.g. Hippocratic Oath; connotes a direct connection with antiquity or some “source” of something important – the usage is continuous, but the content isn’t and can even wholly change in meaning.
    - Repeated and apparently evocative principles and ideas are evident in modern media products, specifically not by name or even implied to be continuous. This usage presumes an underlying human symbology or story (or cycle) which can be recognized in its current form which uses modern cultural content with relevant details.
  3. Myth as a social or psychological function – in this, “myth” means a person’s or group’s adoption of modern content into what you might call a personal cosmos, a story which provides visual and verbal vocabulary (symbols) for what they feel or know.
    - Jungian concepts like archetypes and the collective unconscious, which go beyond merely symbology into mysticism. The mythology is the tip of the iceberg of mystic reality and a person can achieve fulfilment through embracing these symbols as they appear in real life and modern media, creating a self-role in the myth. I’ve found the Canadian novelist Robertson Davies more direct and easy to understand than scholarly theorists.
    - Semiotics is pretty much the opposite: mythology of this sort is produced by the specific and immediate history of power, meaning, wealth, violence, education, and the imposition of all three, law. It includes the concept of “signs,” or indicators of identity and purpose which trigger one’s reactions, sense of purpose, or compliance. My go-to reference is Roland Barthes, especially his short book Mythologies.

**ALESSIO:** Hi Ron, you were on target and you have understood my issue perfectly. Thank you for the answer. I'll try your advice and I look forward to let you know how it goes.

- **Me:** I reviewed my reply and thought of something more. Let's go to those "Whoever" games, in which you make up Character Bob and this character is played in circumstances which were not constructed with any reference to him specifically. Why do you find that easier? Is it because you had "gone dark" from the start and never have to play Bob as anything but a response-panel to the GM's content? In a game of this kind, do you play Bob as his own guy with things he might believe, want, refer to, and do? Or do you take it as a given that you don't have to, and since nothing in the situation is about him (except for him being there), then you can base your activity in play on a GM's specific request or content based on "roll to notice" or "roll for initiative?" Basically, a lot of people have been trained never to play. During a number of (frankly) bad experiences of play during 2021 and 2022, I discovered that when I did, in fact, play my character idiosyncratically, as if they had an inner life, as if it would matter that they were here instead of someone else, GMs were thrown hard off their game. Sometimes to the point of confusion and disorientation, sometimes to the point of ignoring me to a shocking degree (impossible to disguise from

everyone), and sometimes to the point of frustration and fury. Go ahead and watch me play Korsakov in Star Trek Adventures, Hannu in Darkurthe Legends, Reverend Otto in Väsen, Thin Mind in Godsend Agenda, and Hazard in The Whispering Vault. You will never see me "disrupt" in the sense of not respecting the immediate situation and my character's involvement in it. You won't see me step on the fictional authorities held by the GM or anyone else. But something about what I do is not what those GMs wanted: for this character actually to be played.

- **Alessio:** I think we've found our focus on the problem. When I create a character, although I know it's my job at the table, I act as if it's the GM/facilitator that must grant me the spotlight for reincorporation. But your example of the bandits has shown me that in any moment that's my responsibility. I don't have to the ask the permission: I can do that -- as you say -- without the need to interfere, reject or distrust the actual situation. I can bring the character's background up at any time and signal my interest to explore it when the actual situation has reached a conclusion and shifted to another one.

**JESSE:** I'm glad you brought up the phenomenon of players "going dark" with regard to things on their character sheet that aren't brought into play explicitly. It's something that I've been thinking about a lot lately. I was reflecting on how I really noticed this going all the way back to when I was running episodic mystery horror games like Chill. A player might have "Drug Addict" on their sheet but literally never brings it up once there was a dead body with weird bite marks to investigate. You'd think that a game with Fear rolls and Willpower loss would be excellent triggers for any kind of "I probably need a fix right about now" reaction but nope! Never mentioned unless the scenario itself was specifically about drug use. I suspect this phenomenon is why we have so many earn XP, meta-currency, bonus die, whatever mechanisms for "tapping" these elements on your sheet. It's common for players to "go dark" with regard to them. It leads me to wonder what other things we can do, besides mechanical bribery, to foster engaging those elements.

- **Me:** Something about your final two sentences seems off to me. There isn't any "we" that can be juxtaposed with a category called "players." This may seem like splitting hairs, so I can only look at the Khaotic game I GM'd yesterday, which used rather detailed pregenerated characters, and in which the people playing adopted their flaws, quirks, goals, etc, with ferocity. They didn't just play something assigned to them per sheet, but integrated the parts into a whole that was entirely specific to each person playing. The people playing did not all know one another, so this wasn't some developed or expected skill they brought as a group. Did I "foster" it? If I did, I certainly had no method that I applied, at least not knowingly. I'm inclined rather to think that qualities of play itself were involved, especially early, which didn't "teach" them so much as empowered what they could already do. I know this kind of talk sounds hippy-dippy and encounter-y, so I stress that I'm talking about real and concrete phenomena, not anything numinous or unguessable. Perhaps it will be evident in the video when I post it.