

And the Crops Withered: Designing TTRPGs to Enliven Myths

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ABSTRACT

And the Crops Withered (Alice D Games 2025) is a single-player tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) I designed, inspired by the Greek myth of “The Abduction of Persephone.” In this game, players narrate the journey of Demeter, the harvest goddess, across a world ravaged by her own divine fury to find her missing daughter. Demeter’s quest is constructed as the player draws cards from a tarot deck and matches the suit to a prompt to guide narration. This presentation covers my process for designing *And the Crops Withered*, in which I situate game design as what Ratto (2011) calls “critical making” and demonstrate it as a tool for mythologizing. Through this articulation, I argue that game design can enliven myths, translating them to speak to contemporary circumstances.

I began by comparing different versions of Persephone’s myth and using Joseph Campbell’s () analysis of myth to develop a core theme for the game. Campbell articulates four functions of myth:

- The *mystical function* inspires in the individual a sense of awe and gratitude in relation to the mystery dimension of the universe
- The *cosmological function* the cosmological function presents an image of the universe that links local knowledge and individual experience to that mystery dimension
- The *sociological function* validates, supports, and imprints on the individual the norms of that society
- The *psychological function* serves to guide each individual through the stages of life, within the context of that culture

The protomyth links the divine figures navigating the links between life and death, grief, and trauma (the mystical function) to explain seasonal change (the cosmological function). Interpretations and revisions of the myth have since reflected the values of storytellers who find power and/or problematics in the original tale. For example, Spretnak’s (1992) version removes Hades altogether to focus on the dynamics between Demeter, a cautious mother, and a curious Persephone stepping into her power. Others, such as Roberts (2021), paint the relationship between Hades and Persephone as a vehicle for a daughter to escape the clutches of her overbearing mother. By Campbell’s framework of myth, these versions emphasize mother-

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daughter-society dynamics (sociological function) and often focus on Persephone's perspective (psychological function). From my comparisons, I noticed that interpretations focused on Persephone's perspective, where the original myth did not; yet, she still endures deep trauma. Comparing the perspective shifts among versions led me to realize that we do not need to fully know Persephone's trauma to witness it; rather, we can hold trauma and resilience without minimizing either.

Establishing my core experience, I began prototyping. Based on my game core, I realized that casting Persephone as the primary character would conclude in a finite answer to what happened to her, which would override my intention. I decided to focus on Demeter's perspective so that the player only guess at what happened to Persephone and eventually wove a web of speculation that informed the outcome of the game. Ann Sullivan's work on using tarot as procedural story generation, as well as my own experience reading tarot learned from years of practice in several communities, informed my core loop. I created a storytelling system leveraging the suit of cards and aligning it with prompts based on themes in the tarot:

- Wands – labor and passion
- Swords – psyche and decisions
- Cups – emotions
- Pentacles – nature and investments
- Major arcana – Demeter speaks with another Deity

In this initial version, I did not constrain which deity the player selected. The game proceeds when Demeter knows where Persephone is and has a plan to confront Hades. By this point, Persephone has eaten pomegranate seeds. I leveraged nonviolent communication framing towards from Persephone's perspective with vast storytelling potential. The player responds to the following prompt: "What need does Persephone tell Demeter she was meeting by eating the seeds of the pomegranate?" The player then narrates an epilogue set upon Persephone's return to the underworld in which Demeter shares parting words with her daughter: What are the parting words? How does the winter reflect how Demeter feels about the outcome? Drawing from the protomyth, I considered how environmental storytelling provides a metaphor for reflection.

Having a prototype, I conducted playtesting and iteration. I ran my first playtest serving as a game master, guiding a couple of players through the procedures of play. The major outcome of this playtest highlighted my assumptions of player's knowledge of Greek mythology and deities. I iterated the game to include a list of the Major Arcana cards, naming deities that aligned with their interpretations. I also included my own retelling of Persephone's myth in the updated document. Using Google Forms, I conducted a second round of playtesting, in which I was seeking insight into the layout, rules, experience, and familiarity with Greek myth. While the list improved the game experience, testers reported not really knowing much about the deities. Testers also highlighted that my game assumed a positive dynamic between mother and daughter.

Iterating towards the final design, I seized the opportunity to further use the mother-daughter dynamic to be a point of possible narrative tension and created a setup system to determine what the relationship between Demeter and Persephone is. This would help set the tone for the game and paint Demeter's motivations for finding her daughter. I iterated the deity list to focus each card on one deity and list a bit of their

domains to help players get a sense of these figures. In laying out the game, I used a zine format to denote that players are part of the meaning-making (simultaneously mythologizing) processes of the game. I updated safety tools from other TTRPG systems to conform to the experience of documentation. To demonstrate that this game is an active tool for mythologizing, and in conversation with other versions of the story, I included my own reflection and version of the myth, and used public domain art inspired by this story throughout the zine, as well as list of “Further Readings,” my research for this project.

Keywords

Mythology, tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), critical game design

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