

Worldbuilding More Interesting Deities in 5e

The gods in *DM Quest* ([watch episodes here!](#)) play a big part in the narrative of our campaign. Jasper is a divine soul of the Treefather, Dakren found solace from his demonic pact in the goddess Tonna, Shaz is a war champion of Tual'dir, and Hargus the bard has a... complicated past with Bancotha, the goddess of death. We use the rules for piety as found in *Mythic Odysseys of Theros*, and the extra abilities we've gotten from our relationships with the gods have created some of the most memorable roleplaying experiences in all of my time playing D&D.

However, there have been some moments I thought detracted from our gameplay experience—mostly involving non-cleric players saying a prayer to a god and getting amazing boons for very little work, or multiplying the number of days of downtime by the number of times the character could cast *commune* to basically divine the answer to absolutely any puzzle in the game.

Just as Superman is the least interesting superhero because he has all the powers and only one easily-avoidable weakness, gods who know everything and are always waiting on their followers' every need to give them whatever they ask are boring. Interesting stories come from interesting choices and from creatively dealing with constraints and challenges, and it doesn't make sense that a being with as high of an existence as a god would play such an intimate part in mortals' quests and questions.

Instead of making gods all-encompassing in their influence over mortal affairs, consider juggling the following godly attributes for each deity: **omnipotent** (all-powerful), **omniscient** (all-knowing), and **omnibenevolent** (all-caring). Only picking one of them will make for a much more interesting god for your religious player characters to interact with.

Omnipotent: Mortals Are Ants

Imagine if an ant colony in your yard started worshipping you. At first, it might be fun to listen to their petitions. A single slice of cake is pennies to you but can feed the entire colony for months. Pouring boiling water down a rival ant colony's anthill takes less than an hour and no real sacrifice on your part. To the ants, you are omnipotent. But aside from the occasional amusement it gives you to be a god in the ants' eyes, what do you get out of it? If the ants constantly asked for your help, you would most likely burn a few of them with a magnifying glass to shut them up and show them who they're dealing with. They're just ants, after all—There's a million of them, they're all basically the same, and in a few years, none of the ants you're dealing with now will be alive anyway.

But suppose the ants can find and dig up little gold nuggets from deep in the earth. The gold is useless to the ants, but you can sell them to improve your human quality of life. If the ants provide something useful to you, you're more likely to listen to them whenever they happen to have a new offering for you.

One day, however, an ant approaches you with a question: "O Great Food-Giver and Boiler of the Wicked, we are seeking an endless source of underground water. Where should we dig?" Regardless of the amount of gold filings the ants could offer you to answer this question, there's not much you can do to answer the question. You have the power to dig up the anthill to see how deep you can get till you hit underground water, and you have all the water you could ever need if the ants paid you for small amounts of it each day, but there's no way for you to help with this petition. You just don't have the knowledge.

An **omnipotent** deity is all-powerful. They can cause the effect of any cleric spell from 1st level to 9th, as well as any other spell that fits with their domain, or grant a use of that spell to whomever they designate. They can summon celestial creatures of exceptional power to do their work and otherwise affect the world in spectacular ways. An omnipotent god *can* do these things, but they likely won't unless they're in a good mood, or if you do something in return. Such sacrifices or quests done for the god may not make sense to mortals, since they are so much higher in existence than you or I are, but they are likely things that the god cannot do for themselves and that is worth a trade of their power. And even if a god can grant you the powers needed to defeat the ancient dragon, or to grant you enhanced tracking skills to seek it out, they may not know exactly where the dragon is regardless of the potency of your offering to them.

Omnibenevolent: Mortals Are Pets



Imagine you are a dog lover, and you are fortunate enough to own a whole pack of adorable dogs on your large property. You know each and every dog's name, personality, likes and dislikes, and what is needed to keep each dog as happy as can be. Each dog is immunized, collared, and licensed, and all the dogs are safe in a wide, fenced park. Whenever you get any extra money, you save up for vet visits and periodic gifts of treats and toys for your beloved pooches.

In time, you become so in tune with these dogs that they develop the ability to speak with you. Many of them love you as much as you love them, while others are more neutral towards you and a few are even mean or dismissive. But it doesn't matter to you. You love each of these dogs, and while you are more easily inclined to give the nicer dogs what they ask for, ultimately you would do anything for any of them.

One day, however, one of your dogs, Saxon, approaches you. "O Great Caretaker, Loving Master, I have something to request of you."

"Anything, my beloved fur-child," you probably say. I dunno, I'm not that big of a pet owner.

"I want to eat a whole pound of wagyu beef."

You hesitate for just a moment as you think about the price of such a request. Normally you would give Saxon, or any of your beloved puppies of yours, anything they asked for, but a \$600 dollar treat? Even as you look past Saxon's large brown eyes, you notice other dogs perk up an ear and turn toward you to see your response, no doubt ready to ask for the same thing if you accept.

It pains you to say it, but you slowly shake your head. "I'm so sorry, Saxon... I can't." You almost say "I can't afford it," but dogs don't use money. They wouldn't understand what that means. "I can give you something smaller, but that is beyond my capabilities."

And, I dunno, the dog asks you what it needs to do to win the heart of one of your other dogs as a mate and you don't know. You get the idea—as much as you'd like to help, you're not omniscient either.

An **omnibenevolent** deity is all-caring. They care deeply about the lives of mortals. Though they are more ready to answer those who draw closer to them through service, prayer, and offerings, they weep for the losses and difficulties of all mortals under their watch. They're still a deity, so they can duplicate the effect of their domain spells and cleric spells up to 4th or 5th level; and they are more than happy to send their divine messengers to help petitioners, possibly without asking any cost at all; however, they are limited in what they can do to help or answer questions. If they cannot give what a mortal needs, they are at least always a good source of encouragement and hope.

Omniscient: Mortals Are Students

Imagine you are the most prestigious and intelligent professor in the world. You teach classes on various subjects, and students who learn from you go on to do great things with the knowledge you gain. You have published scores of books on every topic imaginable, each praised to no end by scholars, and other intellectuals quote your work in their own works. You have a strong online presence as well, sharing your knowledge with the most reputable websites and blogs on the net. Almost every Wikipedia article has a link to something you've written.

It's easy to offer your boundless knowledge to those who pay you to come talk on public radio shows or to those who pay for your books, but when students message you online or send you letters asking specific things, it's hard to find the motivation to respond to all of them without some kind of payment. The questions they ask are so easy. Why can't they just figure the answers out themselves? Sure, it would be easy to find some time in your day to go answer droves of mailed questions, and every once in a great while you are in the mood to do that, but sometimes it's more fun to answer their question with a question to get them thinking about it on their own, or to direct



their question to a different place to find out the answer. You worked hard for this knowledge—what use would it be to give it to others for free?

Every once in a while, you'll get an email from some student who thinks that your intelligent renown comes with other types of authority—an email that says something like "O Great Knowledgeable One, can you publish my book?" or "Can you get my professor fired?" You don't own a publishing company, and you are no dean with power over other professors' tenures. Of course, you know who does, and if the student strikes your fancy or has some type of payment or knowledge that you find useful, you might direct them to the right source, but your own influence ends there.

An **omniscient** deity is all-knowing. They have knowledge about the past, the present, and the future. They know the geography of distant lands, the histories of lost civilizations, and the secrets of crafting legendary magic items. They know the answers to riddles and can skilfully predict the courses of action famous figures will take based on their past deeds and current factors and tendencies. They know just about everything, and can duplicate the effect of spells in their domain like other non-omnipotent gods, but *why* would they do these things? Such deities likely treasure their knowledge and do not give it out unless their petitioners prove themselves worthy or bring a suitable offering. Even then, it might be more fun for an omniscient deity to give out riddles that lead their petitioners to the truth, or to be otherwise cryptic in their responses.

Bonus Attribute: Omnipresent

If you want to make your gods even more interesting and challenging to deal with, you can treat **omnipresence** as a fourth attribute and only allow your deities to choose two of the four. Most classic deities are already omnipresent by default, able to hear prayers from anywhere and to intercede anywhere they need to (provided it doesn't intrude on another god's turf). But if you take this attribute away, you end up with a deity with more capabilities with the downside that you must visit the deity in a specific physical place, at a specific time, or under specific circumstances in order to make your petition heard at all. This means that even with the *commune* spell, a follower of such a god would have to follow the parameters of where the god was specifically present in order for the spell to function.

Consider an **omnipotent-omniscient** deity, able to bestow boons of great power or knowledge to those who offer large enough of an offering. The catch is that this offering or demonstration of worthiness must be brought to the god wherever they may be, perhaps only in their highest temple, in a specific cave where the deity lives, in the ocean when no land is visible in any direction, or at a pool that acts as a window to the god's plane of existence. It is only there that the god's power can be focused, whether to empower, destroy, or otherwise send supernatural aid.

An **omniscient-omnibenevolent** deity has a vast store of knowledge, and unlike an omnipresent-omniscient deity, it is anxious to share this knowledge with any mortal who manages to grace their presence. The problem is that this deity's wisdom can only be accessed during a full moon, a

solar eclipse, a thunderstorm (making it unlikely to contact them in desert areas), or during a king's speech.

Lastly, consider possibly the most powerful deity of all, one that is **omnipotent-omnibenevolent**. Such a god does not require grand sacrifices or shows of worthiness to bestow their blessings, since they are invested in mortal matters. However, the process for speaking to and making your petition to the deity might be as complicated as a sacrifice anyway, involving ritually burning a type of rare wood, visiting an oracle who lives in a remote location, drinking soporific herbs and visiting the god in a dream, or praying while in a particular costume at a theatrical performance.

Adding these creative constraints to gods, possibly even allowing players to decide on what those attributes are before they become clerics or acolytes, can cut down on *commune* acting as a daily cheat code and add a more meaningful relationship between gods and mortals in the game. Such changes shouldn't feel like nerfs to the game—rather, they should open new roleplaying opportunities and give players new choices on how to solve the puzzles they're faced with.