

By Sandy Petersen

**Introduction**

Ever since I found a tattered, World war II vintage copy of the works of H. P. Lovecraft in my father's library in 12th grade, I have been enthralled by Lovecraft's creations. The exotic monsters, black terrific atmosphere, and overall mood of horror all combined in my mind to form many shudder-some moments. I greedily devoured all of Lovecraft's stories I could get my hands on, and now, fourteen years later, Lovecraft is firmly ensconced in my heart as my all-time author.

I have been engaged in fantasy role-playing for nearly eight years now – almost as long as the 'genre' has been in existence. Two years ago, a friend of mine, Steve Marsh, suggested that I start a campaign based on what he called "American Gothic"; by this he meant a fantasy campaign taking place in the modern era, with only a little magic, and most monsters stemming from '50s horror movies and modern horror literature. I actually started this campaign and went to the trouble of detailing all the possible types of scenarios that could exist, and made up some special rules for combat, experience and so forth. This campaign was short and abortive, but the things I learned from it planted some of the seeds for later work.

A year and a half ago, I wrote to Chaosium, offering my services in writing up a *RuneQuest* variant based on a fantasy world derivative of H. P. Lovecraft's dreamlands cycle, as best exemplified by the short novel *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*. Greg Stafford replied that they were working on a variant game entitled *Dark Worlds* which was to cover H. P.

**CALL of CTHULHU**  
**Designers' Notes**

FIRST COPIES OF CALL OF CTHULHU WERE DELIVERED TO OUR OFFICES AMID A THREE-DAY STORM OF RAIN, LIGHTNING AND THUNDER ON FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 1981. FREQUENT POWER OUTAGES AND OTHER STRANGE HAPPENINGS WERE NUMEROUS.

By Lynn Willis

*Call of Cthulhu* is a boxed role-playing game set in 1920's United States, the place and time in which horror-writer H. P. Lovecraft originated what became known as the Cthulhu mythos. The game works best with four or fewer players, each of whom might run 1-3 characters. The characters will investigate mysterious Cthulhoid events and situations. *Call of Cthulhu* is the first published fleshing-out of the *Basic Role-Playing* rules, a system designed for quick and simple RPGing. Like *RuneQuest*, *CC* is percentile-oriented, and it uses the same initial characteristics and some of the skills.

**The Cthulhu Mythos**

By temperament an antiquarian and student of the bizarre, Lovecraft developed a cycle of tales hypothesizing that beings of great power dwell on Earth, biding their time until they can reclaim the surface of our world and extinguish upstart mankind. The being Cthulhu happens to have the largest cult among the degenerate offshoots of humanity who would wor-

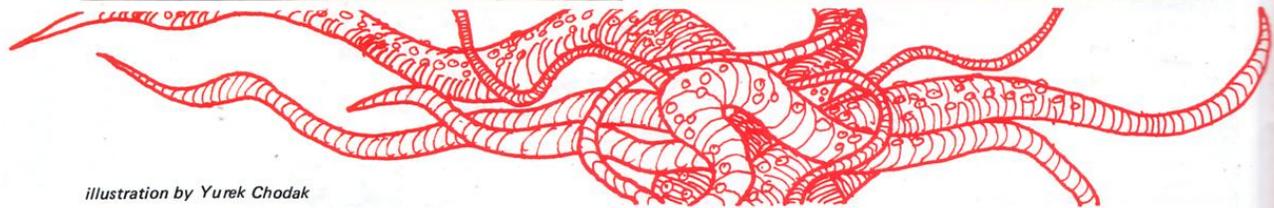


illustration by Yurek Chodak

Lovecraft's novels in a modern sense. My fancy was immediately struck by this, and I begged Greg for a chance to get in on the project. My craven begging bore fruit a few months later, when, beyond my expectations, Chaosium dumped the entire project in my lap. I was going to be allowed to do the whole thing myself. Chaosium sent me very little source material at first and I was very much on my own, not even knowing what the previous workers had done. The assignment seemed relatively easy to me, and after some slight toying with the project, I hit some mild snags and decided to let the project sit a few months. When I was finally prodded back into action again, I looked more closely at the situation and was appalled.

#### The Problems

When I first approached the project, I thought that it would be ridiculously easy; all I would have to do is put the *RuneQuest* rules in a different time period, add some new monsters, and have different cults than those in *Cults of Prax*. But it proved not to be that easy. Working on the project I discovered that I would have to formulate an entirely different magical system consistent with the books, yet playable; I needed to make a fairly complete listing of modern skills, such as Automobile Driving, Mechanical Repair, Psychoanalysis, Library Use (for which skill I am indebted to Steve Marsh once again), and so forth; I also had to make a list of, and rules for modern weapons including guns — no small project in itself. It seemed to me that overnight the project had multiplied in size and complexity by about a thousand times.

All the foregoing difficulties were actually minor compared to the one paramount design problem which I faced: how can

I make the mood of a fantasy role-playing game match the mood of a modern horror story? I needed spooky happenings to get the players chilled, I needed black horrors that would chill the minds and blast the souls of the intrepid investigators, and I needed to make sure that the game did not degenerate into a slugfest or simple matching of power against power.

#### The Solutions

The monsters were relatively easy to develop. I already had experience in making up monsters for gaming (having had a book of 99 new monsters for *RuneQuest* published by Chaosium a few months previously), making my task simple. I pored through all the stories written by Lovecraft and a great number written by his imitators and picked out all the hideous abnormalities that seemed to be at all consistent from story to story. The total was surprisingly low, and I had to dredge up monsters from quite obscure stories and collaborations in order to have a respectable number of creatures to smite the players. In most cases specifics were lacking on the monster, so I had to do a little bit of educated fudging, giving the monster in question abilities that at best were only implied in the story. I was not completely arbitrary in this and feel that the results make for a harmonious whole.

The 'cults' were much more difficult. They could obviously not be correlated with the normal *RuneQuest* cult rules, both battle magic and Rune spells being conspicuously absent in the normal world. At first, I tried to simply write up all the different deities as if they were normal monsters, listing SIZ, POW, and so forth for each different god, along with some brief notes about the cult, if any, of that particular

ship such an entity; he may also be the most powerful being on the planet. The protagonists of the stories are like Lovecraft in their uniform love of old and strange things, and Faustian in their will to know the meaning of the Cthulhoid clues across which they stumble.

Each story in the mythos depicts a narrator's dawning comprehension and shock at discovering this disconcerting threat to life as we know it. By accepting the narrators, the readers for a moment accept as well those horrifying conclusions of impending doom. Feelings of underlying menace and of ill-glimpsed, uncontrollable forces are congenial to our era, and account for some of the popularity of Lovecraft's work.

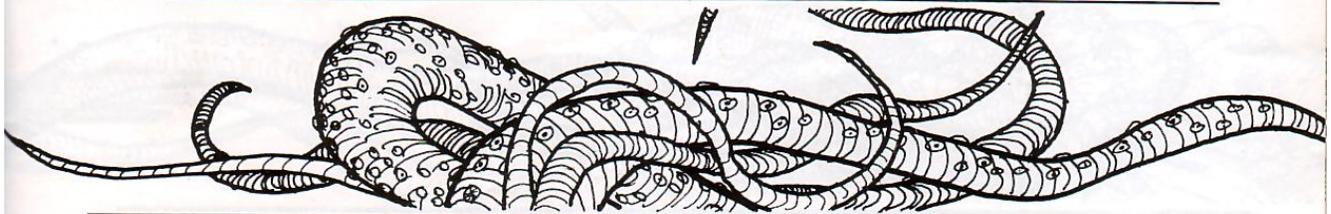
The game consists of the *Call of Cthulhu* rules, a *Sourcebook for the 1920's, Basic Role-Playing* (the CC rules start from *BRP*), cut-out characters for use in play, character sheets, a special world map, six dice, and other inserts. It is boxed, with an excellent Gene Day full-color painting on the front, and sells for \$19.95. There are no Elder Signs, dark gems, or mysterious manuscripts written on debatable surfaces includ-

ed, yet powerful forces were at work to prevent this game ever from being published; surely *mi-go* scuttled around corners, and vast putrescences rose above the wooded hills!

#### The Origins of the Game

Originally, *Call of Cthulhu* was not about Cthulhu at all. (We say it 'kuh-THOOL-hoo'; Lovecraft said it 'tluhluh' or 'khlul-hloo,' but he wasn't trying to get gamers to ask for it by name in stores.) Nor was Sandy Petersen the designer. The springboard for *Cthulhu* was a proposal from a free-lance designer about a gothic fantasy role-playing game, and he wanted some incidental use of Lovecraft descriptions. His proposal was interesting. I negotiated rights for the Cthulhu mythos from Arkham House, but after many months delay the manuscript of the game was unsatisfactory, and had to be (with bad feelings and confusion) turned down. It was originally to be a 1980 release; now we were hoping for 1981.

During that time manuscript sections had been lost, letters delayed, and motives misunderstood: all obvious signs of the



being. I quickly discovered that this approach was unsuitable, since the scores I gave the various monster gods was too completely arbitrary, and the possibility of harming one in the course of play too remote for their statistics to really matter. For a month or two, I let the matter of the gods slide and worked on other projects, hoping that a brainstorm would enlighten me to the point where I would be able to finish the project.

The aforesaid brainstorm did finally come, and I listed each god according to its effects when summoned, its characteristics, its worshipers, and the gifts or requirements that it demanded of those worshipers. This approach was eminently workable, and I was quite self-satisfied at its conclusion. Later on in the development of the book, Steve Perrin wanted to re-include the statistics for the deities, and thus the STR, INT, etc of Cthulhu and the rest are now included in the game again. Anyone disagreeing with the particular score we gave any deity is certainly free to modify them to fit their own preconceptions or prejudices instead of ours.

The magical system used in the game was also a special difficulty. Lovecraft made no effort to make any spells in his work seem consistent — his primary objective naturally being to produce horror rather than to give a coherent system for FRP'ing. In fact, in most stories, spells are never cast in the story's course, although the grisly effects of spells are often seen or implied. Another difficulty is that only the 'bad guys' usually have any spells. I needed to make the spells such that the players would usually be afraid to use such black arts. In order to create spells, I simply theorized as to what spells would be needed in order to produce the effects seen in the books, and applied my theories. It was easy enough after that,

surreptitious influence of something in our affairs. But events turned for the better. While I had been reluctant to pull a concept from its originator, Greg had been hopping about for months waiting to see the project roll: he nominated Sandy Petersen, a long-time Lovecraft fan who met every deadline. Sandy jumped at the chance. It was agreed that the rules would become exclusively about the Cthulhu mythos, since we had those rights. (This change of authorship clearly escaped the notice of those beings in charge of foiling the game, since there were no complications.) The rules were to follow the general *RuneQuest* development order, but what more happened between Greg and Sandy should be left for them to write.

The draft which Sandy sent was substantially the first part of the rulesbook as published, minus ten or so pages of copy, a few maps, and Gene Day's interior illustrations. Al Dewey was kind enough to start a weekly Cthulhu campaign, and was careful to follow the rules as written, so that we could accurately perceive how the game would play as written. Most of the subsequent modifications concerned the new character-

istics, Education (EDU) and Sanity (SAN), and the combat section.

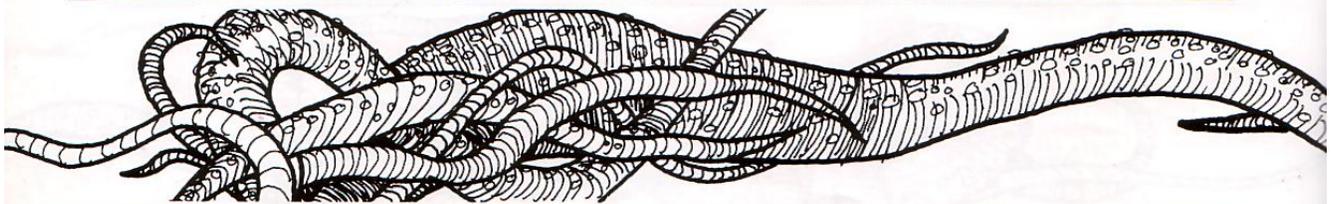
since most of the spells were being used to contact or control the various monsters and/or deities in the Cthulhu Mythos, and a very few spells with different effects thrown in. The players are discouraged from using too many spells, since the process of using spells directly gains contact with many grisly beings, most of which there is no protection against.

The skill listing was not one of the major problems in the game. I took a few days to formulate lists of all the skills which I felt would be usable in the game, and then took a few more days to write up the effects of these skills in game terms. Greg Stafford was of help here, in that he sent me a list of what he felt would be useful skills. The skill list is prominent for the large number of esoteric knowledge skills on it, including such skills as Accounting, Archaeology, Law, Linguistics, Geology, Zoology, and so forth. Many other skills presented themselves to my fevered mind, but limitations of space and sanity precluded my putting them all in. Any good game referee should be able to determine the effects of skills not included in the game already. One such skill, that I feel should have been included, is Photography. Maybe the second edition will have it.

One shortcoming which may be made manifest to some readers is the preponderance of academic subjects in the skills list. Being a student myself, I have a natural tendency to see the world in an academic light, and to list the skills I know best as the most specialized and subdivided, so that there are separate skills for Psychology and Psychoanalyze but only a single skill for Operate Heavy Machinery. I can partially justify this bias by the fact that most players in the game will be more intellectually than physically oriented, and by the fact that the vast majority of Lovecraft's heroes were also well-educated in the so-called 'higher sciences.'

As written, Sandy had accurately transposed the Lovecraft universe into gaming terms. That meant that every character who investigated the mythos eventually would go insane, since Lovecraft never showed such knowledge as anything but ultimately frustrating or destructive. Dark endings may be effective ways to end short stories, but they do not work for FRP — nobody enjoys seeing their characters always crushed, impaled, drained, sliced, throttled, and otherwise made corpses of without relief, and neither is it much fun to have Investigators staggering from Catatonia to Amnesia to Stupefaction without much chance to do more than shrug.

We changed Sanity into a two-way ticket, leaving the initial premise: the more a character knows about Cthulhoid things, the crazier he gets. Characters ceased the plunge to NPC-dom (the referee — the Keeper in this game — gets all the permanently insane characters as well as the dead ones). A character can go temporarily insane and recover his Sanity up to his current maximum SAN, and he even can extend his Sanity up to



Since I am no gun nut, I was incompletely prepared to deal with the problem of firearms in the rules. Everyone I knew gave me a different story on how much damage guns would do, how many shots they would fire, etc. The first gun listings done were far too low on damage given, and the second group were much too high. Finally I sat down with Steve Perrin and Sean Summers after Origins '81 and thrashed it out until we all felt that the guns were properly represented. I personally feel that the gun section is one of the more accurate parts of the game, if rather less important in a player's context, since the game is set up to penalize those characters relying on fire-power rather than brainpower.

In trying to make the game itself have the feel of a horror story, I first set up the monsters such that almost any single monster was more than a match for a single character, and some monsters were even beyond the capabilities of even a well-organized party. My motive was not to make the game unplayable or a 'killer,' but to cause the scenarios and actions of a single game session to revolve around plans and plots to dispose of a single horrific event or being.

While I was working out this part of the game, I read an article in *Sorcerer's Apprentice* magazine, which explained how to adapt the Cthulhu mythos to the game of *Tunnels and Trolls* written by Glenn and Phillip Rahman. The article was well-written, but all of it was useless to me (having already progressed past most of the areas covered in the article) except for one part. The article suggested that a new characteristic be added in such a campaign which basically would represent Willpower, and that this score gradually decrease as the player progresses in a game until it reaches zero. The authors also said that the failure of a saving throw based on this characteristic

99 (no one is ever completely sane), so long as he has no Cthulhu Mythos skill. And yet in this game it is as dangerous to know too little as too much.

Greg wrote up regaining and increasing Sanity. Steve Perrin did the insanity categories, adding definition to Sandy's initial 'gibbering formlessness.' Yurek Chodak contributed all but one of the phobia descriptions (Dorothy Heydt did Claustrophobia). I added the availability of psychoanalysis and institutions for curing temporary insanity, and whined about the desperate plight of too-curious or too-confident characters, some of which found form in admonitions about proper style of play.

Steve combed the entire manuscript, tightening and checking it, adding to the weapons rules and writing the examples for combat, magic, and monsters.

#### The Game Delayed

Cthulhu originally was to be an Origins 81 release (derailed by a promise to have *Stormbringer* out then) and then was to be out in time for GenCon in August (derailed again, this time

should result in insanity or fainting. This idea struck me as the perfect way to incorporate a large portion of the Lovecraft feel into the rules.

Originally, I had the Sanity characteristic range from 1-100 at the start of a character's creation, and only go down, and that permanently, upon encountering a monster. When it reached zero, the character would go permanently insane. This oversimplistic solution proved poor in play. It was changed so that losing varying amounts of Sanity caused different amounts of problems, and each monster, spell, and magical book read caused a different amount of Sanity loss. This made for a very fatalistic or depressing game, as the players watched for their precious Sanity go down, and down, and down . . . In many ways this matched the stories' mood perfectly, but it often made for a feeling of hopelessness in a game. The entire crew at Chaosium evidently bent their efforts to improve on the original system, and the system now allows for increase of Sanity through various means (though the tendency is still definitely towards Sanity loss rather than gain). A reasonably complete chart for appropriate forms of insanity is included as well.

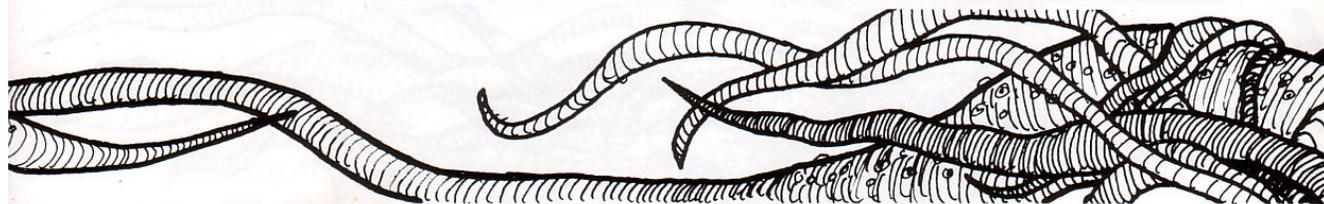
The current sanity rules are quite good, I feel, and still give a feeling of hopelessness to the players at times, though in actual play it is usually possible to overcome the handicaps of having a poor Sanity. The whole concept of Sanity permeates the game and makes it what it is. It allows for such things as the case in my own campaign, where six players stood inside a pentacle trying to summon One Who Walks Between the Planes. When darkness lowered, and scraping noises were heard, several of the characters hid their eyes so that they would not have to see the hideous being. It is hard to imagine such an event happening in *RuneQuest* or *D&D*.

for *Thieves' World*). Neither of these other games were at all Cthulhoid [but the timing is suspicious!].

Preparing for the GenCon trip, I thought I saw a good way to save some time on *Cthulhu* — now really on track because the extended agreement with Arkham ran out if we failed to publish soon. I did an edit and format for the main rules and gave them to a free-lance typesetter; returning from Wisconsin, I started thinking out and assembling the *1920's Sourcebook*. Alas, I had more time to do that than I thought.

#### Other Items in the Box

The *Sourcebook* accompanies *Call of Cthulhu* in the box as an independent item, usable with any role-playing game. It is literally a collection of biographies, time-lines, weapons, prices, transport times, maps, and so on — chosen to enhance adventurous play in the period. The movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark* influenced it in one respect (the archaeological site maps) and I believe there is a reference or two in the weapons examples to one "Ohio Jones," probably a cousin to the better-known hero of similar name.



### Conclusions

An especially charming aspect of the game is that it is set up to be run in the roaring twenties. This time era is close enough to our own to allow us to fully understand the culture, motivations, and activities, yet far enough away so that everything that happened then is covered by a patina of glamor. It is hard for a player to lock horns with Al Capone or meet a young Albert Einstein. The game can easily be run in a more modern time period by a clever referee, and most of the information for a modern campaign is more readily available to the players and the referee. In a campaign set in the 1980s the players will readily know how much a new car costs, or what inventions are available.

A Sourcebook for the 1920s is included in the game to provide supplementary information about the period including all sorts of interesting information (do you know what company advertised its product as coming from contented cows?) and useful facts, such as steamship costs for passage and the internal layout of Pullman cars.

In the game's present form, it plays much like an adventure mystery, such as the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The players rush around frantically trying to find out what exactly the problem is with which they are faced, trying to cope with it, and trying to get something out of it as well. The game is based on *Basic Role-Playing* — a framework on which the rest of the rules are hung. The simple, yet elegant rules of *BRP* make it easier to get right into playing the game without having to learn about various picky specifics. In fact, it has been my experience that a campaign run in which the players know absolutely nothing about the rules except for what is in *Basic Role-Playing* and how the skills work is one of the finest campaigns that can be run in *Call of Cthulhu*.

The game box had to be made, a nerve-wracking task because the first time I or Charlie Krank see a box design the way it will be printed is when the color-key comes in: all the film work has been done then, a commitment amounting to several thousand dollars. Once the color-key is at hand, it is easy to see errors of color conception or of design balance, but it may be too late to do much about it without expensive corrections that drive up the price of the item. Gene Day contributed a delightful cover painting of a party of adventurers.

Steve drew up a sketch for the character sheet. Since every game differs, every game should have its own character sheets. The one Sandy had been using was converted from *RuneQuest*. Because *Cthulhu* relies upon number relations much less than does *RQ*, the resulting sheet is more open and readable, and less intimidating to newcomers.

Since the minions of Cthulhu threaten the whole world, we needed to add a world map to the package. The experience of our campaign (in which we sailed to Egypt, had endless blood-curdling adventures, were finally ejected from the country,

In writing up this game, I wanted to have a game which both had the overall mood and specific details of the Cthulhu Mythos. Additionally, I wanted to make an enjoyable and easily playable game. I think that I have succeeded (though not without help) in both of these requirements. Being a player (though not a referee) in a *Call of Cthulhu* game requires perhaps less rules knowledge than any other role-playing game that I know, yet still gives the player an excellent return in fun, adventure, and chills. The very subject of the game, along with the setting, encourages role-playing rather than simple rules-following. If the goal of the campaign is to stop the evil Cthulhu and his minions from destroying the world, a suitably heroic (though horrific) death for a player can be truly edifying for all. I think you'll like the game as much as I do. If (barbarous thought) a person should decide to use the game not as a game in itself, but as a Lovecraftian source for monsters, magic, books, etc., for a different game, it works well for that too. I would have to say it is probably better as a source for *RuneQuest* than any other role-playing game except *Worlds of Wonder*.

### Thoughts on Running a Campaign

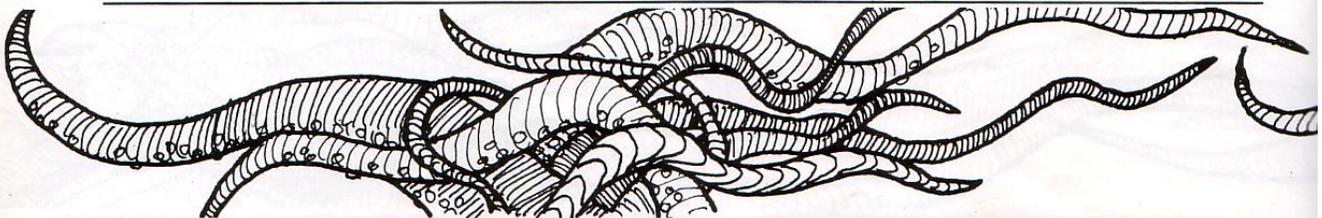
If you want to run a campaign of *Call of Cthulhu*, a lot of background work will need to be done (as in most RPGs). In particular, a network connecting one scenario to another will need to be forged by the referee. In the rulesbook itself, I compare such a network to a series of layers — as one discovers more, he is led to ever more deep dark secrets. For example, in my campaign, the characters, while investigating a haunted house, were led to an old ruined church that the former inhabitant of the house (a Cthulhu worshiper) had

took the Orient Express, encountered some interesting Transylvanians, and had an unusual time in a Bavarian monastery) showed just how much fun (and how many accents) we could have with the rules, and I wanted the map to reflect that. Yurek drew the outlines and the tentacles, I added the teeny names and symbols, and Charlie cut the screens. The Cthulhoid sites shown are approximate when followed by a question-mark. The archaeological sites include all or nearly all of the detailed sketches in the *Sourcebook*.

### Final Problems

The typesetting for the main book had been designed to lay out the body of the book as well as simply to put the text into print, and to that end I spent several week-ends sitting by a terminal, figuring out proper page breaks and re-writing to fit tables and illustrations where they might reasonably go.

Imagine my joy when most of the copy came back in unusable and incomplete form. Efforts to further correct the copy began to take 7-10 days queue-time before hard copy returned. It was in this time that I began to recall all of those dark cables



gone to. At the church, they found out that the current owner of the church was trying to perform various unholy acts, and indeed was a powerful sorcerer. In trying to deal with him, they were led into a nest of sinister foreigners plotting to infiltrate the government and cause construction of a morbid device that would cause enormous destruction if completed. The players never did get back to exorcising the haunted house, and it stands there still, waiting for unwary persons.

A series of scenarios will need to be devised by a beginning referee, designed like the scenarios given in *Call of Cthulhu*. The players can begin with these scenarios as a sort of episodic play, and as the campaign gets going, the players will make friends and enemies, have places to go, and things going on. Interesting hints, letters from afar, and highly unusual newspaper accounts about the record-breaking monsters that the moonshine whiskey has conjured up in the obscure backwoods town of Dunwich can all go towards keeping things happening.

Good horror movies are one great source of scenario ideas. Suitable changes should be made both to match them up with the Cthulhu Mythos and to change the scenario so that the players won't recognize it. For example, the classic *Frankenstein* redone for the twenties could give players some rough times. Change the names to protect the innocent: the well-known Doctor Von Franken has had recent scientific success in the field of organic revivification. He has recently written a nearly incoherent letter to a professional friend, who is either a player, or who requests the players to go and see what is wrong. Evidently something connected with one of his experiments has gone wrong. Not only that, his fiancée is missing. . .

Popular novels are another good source for scenario ideas. Many of these are also in movie form, but the books usually give better detail. An advantage here is that some players will not have read the book where they may have seen the movie. In the small village of Bethel, New Hampshire (note, Bethel = *Salem's Lot*) there has been some trouble. Many villagers have moved out, and others have simply disappeared. Maybe the mysterious foreigner, 'Stracker,' (who looks suspiciously like James Mason) knows what is going on. Maybe he's even trying to stop it? Who bought the old mansion and why hadn't they fixed it up better?

Probably the finest source of scenarios is Lovecraft himself, and his imitators. Unless your players are real Lovecraft fanatics like me, you should be able to find an obscure story that they won't be familiar with and let them have it. For example, in the story *Horror in the Wax Museum*, the neurotic sculptor Rogers and his Karloffian servant Orabona have a little museum in which the Adult's Alcove is a little bit too realistic. In fact, Rogers even claims that not all his sculptures are, strictly speaking, sculptures. Does an intrepid player take his bet that he will not be able to remain a night in the Museum? If he does stay, why do the more morbid monstrosities in the Adult's Alcove seem to move while he is not looking? And what is that noise in the basement?

I hope this overview of the problems I had with the game, and suggestions on scenarios helps you to enjoy it. If you like the game, have questions or comments, suggestions or additions, please feel free to write me care of the Chaosium or this magazine. If you enclose a self addressed stamped envelope, I'll be sure to reply. If you don't, I may anyway if your letter is especially flattering/interesting/useful/annoying.

on the floor below the terminal: where they all cables, or were some of them something else? Did I always stumble over them because I was clumsy, or did some of them *move*?

Thus it was that by the beginning of October I missed my first SAN roll, and had to take a week off.

#### Conclusion

Eventually the project did get done, of course, breaking budgets and schedules along the way. Cthulhu and his minions were foiled, at least temporarily, and more hard data about them and their machinations has been published in this game than in perhaps any other artifact of the entire mythos, all of it quantified, organized, and immediately available to hard-pressed Investigators.

*Cthulhu* is my favorite role-playing game now, since so much of the play is concerned with building proper atmosphere and since it strongly encourages real cooperation between the characters. Set in the 1920's, a time just strange enough to be exotic, the setting is yet familiar enough that most of the

minutiae that can plague fantasy-world runs here is handled by common knowledge. Referees presenting a scenario will be amazed at how little of their time needs to be spent building traps, mazes, and monsters, and at how much of the run can concern role-playing and story-telling. The level of violence is generally low; when violence does occur, however, it does so with truly shocking speed and power. This game of contrasts and searches can be as charming and urbane as an old Alfred Hitchcock thriller, or as stunning as the latest drive-in no-story cut-'em-up.

I hope this article explains how *Cthulhu* came to be as you have it; many decisions must be made and even more things happen in order to turn an idea into a manuscript and then into the marketable game you might want. Such stories usually are not told, because they involve many people and are long and complex. In fact, it is often not clear even at the time just who is responsible for a rule or a concept — it may in fact be three or four people. One of the nice things about role-playing games is that there are many heroes; the same is true for role-playing game companies. □

