

Kick Off: Starting Cthulhu

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Getting characters interested in an adventure for *Call of Cthulhu* is difficult. The lure of gold, the promise of adventure, or a patron's reward are all inappropriate. Something different is needed.

The opening of a scenario in any game is important, but for *Call Of Cthulhu* it is especially so. In *Call of Cthulhu* the characters are enticed into an adventure that will threaten their lives and sanity. An opening must either pitch them into a situation and force them to react, or be strong enough for characters to choose to abandon the cosy trappings of modern living and pit their wits against the furies from hell.

So why is it difficult to design an appropriate opening to an adventure? The idea is easy: Deep Ones overrunning the sewers? A vampire in parliament? Cthugha in the attic? Good, fun, ideas – but how do you get the players involved? Waving the mythos in their faces works, but surely there are better ways to get them involved without resorting to such heavy-handedness?

Different games have different requirements. Campaigns and One-Night-Stands have needs of their own, and a good opening depends on whether the characters are Ordinary People, or Determined Investigators.

Either way, the opening must be powerful enough to remind the players later in the game what they are doing and why are doing it. “Because we read about it in the Guardian,” is bad. “Because it killed my wife,” is better.

There is a difference between the start of an adventure and the beginning of play. The beginning of play occurs every time the players get together, while an opening happens but once in an adventure. A campaign might have several openings – each one a lead to another piece of a macabre jig-saw. Once complete, the players should know what needs to be done to save civilization-as-we-know-it, and play is continuous.

Games can be broken into two broad categories: One-Night-Stands and Campaigns. A one-night-stand is a short self contained adventure lasting only a few sessions and wraps up at the end. A brief spell of horror, and the players can return to their regular dose of fantasy, cyberpunk, or whatever.

A campaign concerns a group of dedicated characters pitting their wits against the forces of evil, and might ramble on for a year or so. A ‘loose’ campaign consists of several intermittent one-night-stands (perhaps run over the course of a couple of years) using the

same characters. If there is an underlying plot then this might turn into a ‘proper’ campaign nearer the climax. *Shadows of Yog-Sothoth* might be considered a loose campaign.

The needs for openings are quite different for the two. A one-night-stand can be as dramatic and contrived as the Keeper likes; it probably features Ordinary People who need something exciting to motivate them. Campaigns can use low-key openings once the ball is rolling, as Dedicated Investigators will be on the lookout for the bizarre and unusual.

The most satisfying way to play *Call of Cthulhu* is in a carefully planned campaign, characters committed to thwarting the evil machinations of the Keeper’s creations. There might be a couple of self-contained and totally independent adventures to start with, but the main focus of play should be the campaign. A campaign made up of nothing but single adventures seems unrealistic. One or two such adventures in a lifetime might be excusable, but a non-stop series is not.

Openings can be used to dictate the flow of a game. A gentle start, scholarly and subdued, is suited to a brooding menace, lurking patiently beneath the fabric of society. On the other hand, zombies flailing at the window makes for a grand opening to a frantic tale, clock ticking ever closer to an apocalyptic deadline.

All *Call of Cthulhu* characters start out as Ordinary People. You and I, Joe Public, The Punter, going about his daily business. Then something terrible happens – and their world is suddenly turned upside down. Having experienced

the soul-searing horror of the Cthulhu Mythos, the characters may retreat back to mundane normality and out of the game (at least until the sequel). That, or they start on the path towards becoming a Dedicated Investigator.

Ordinary People, naturally enough, work best in a one-night-stand with the Keeper taking a handful of innocents and scaring the hell out of them. Dedicated Investigators are those brave souls that keep a campaign moving, ever striving to thwart Dread Cthulhu’s plans. Ordinary People do crop up in a campaign – but not for long. They either return to their homes and families (perhaps the character--or player--didn’t fit in) or become Dedicated Investigators themselves.

As far as an opening goes, Ordinary People need a more dynamic opening than Dedicated Investigators, who are on the lookout for strangeness.

The ideal supernatural investigator is unencumbered by family and dependants, has plenty of free time, is stout of heart and has an independent income. Most importantly, he has a motive, a reason for doing what he does. This may be the lure of fame or fortune, a yearning for knowledge, simple revenge, a love of excitement, or a sense of duty.

A good opening can capitalize on these motives – perhaps by hinting at fabulous treasures or forgotten lore. Catering for those stricken with a conscience is easy: almost any opening will send them off to right wrongs and do good.

The Corpse

Preferably fresh, and usually a close friend. Corpses are perhaps the most common of all openings, and *Masks of Nyarlathotep* is typical. The theory is simple; outraged by the sudden death of a close friend, the characters are compelled to investigate. For the bond of friendship to work, the victim needs to be in play for some while before execution. Otherwise, these close friends just pop up out of the woodwork, and then die shortly afterwards. Being a friend of an investigator is a hazardous occupation.

To work to dramatic effect, the victim needs to be part of the characters' lives, making it ideal for the middle of a campaign. Near the end of the campaign an investigator might not have many friends left anyway.

On the other hand, a murdered spouse or butchered family is an excellent reason for an Ordinary Person to become a Determined Investigator – making its use ideal for one-night-stands and the start of a campaign.

An interesting alternative is to kill off one of the characters instead, after sounding it out with the player beforehand.

An Occupational Hazard

Or, “Hey Barney, there’s some dead geezer downtown with his head missing. Can you cover it?” An ideal opening for journalists, policemen, doctors, private eyes, and the like. During the course of their normal business they uncover a little more than they bargained for.

This is excellent for bringing individual characters into contact with the Cthulhu

Mythos, and starting them on the path to Dedicated Investigator-hood. Good for a one-on-one situation, perhaps as a prelude for bringing a new character into a campaign. In a group situation, with characters from different walks of life, it is less effective.

Other hazards face journalists, artists, and authors: backlash.

If a journalist is to cover a story, what’s to stop his enemies from reading it? Similarly, an author might want to use real-life experiences in his weird fiction, but should dress it up to avoid retaliation.

Artwork has obvious drawbacks.

The Exclusive

An intriguing news story catches the eye, and off the investigators trundle into another episode.

The sad fact about newspaper cuttings is that they do not work, especially for one-night-stands. It is very unrealistic for someone to pick up the daily paper, spot a bizarre item and quite uncharacteristically, on the spur of the moment, dash off to investigate.

It is likely that the only reason the investigation has begun is because the cutting was photocopied from an adventure, and the player therefore knew it was important. (When preparing a published adventure for play, hand-write the cuttings, and throw in one or two red herrings.)

Newspapers are useful for information and leads. They are rarely accurate, but they do give an idea of where to search once the game is afoot.

A horror festering just beneath the surface is best introduced with newspapers. These adventures simply lurk, patiently evil and waiting to be discovered. They are often brutal, and are suited to a campaign during which the players, after having their noses bloodied, can retreat for a while and try again later. *Dark Carnival* and *The Asylum* are typical examples. A few scattered newspaper cuttings may put the group onto the trail. Maybe they investigate, but maybe they don't.

A Friend in Need

In which an acquaintance calls for some assistance, and it all goes horribly wrong. Another popular start and one that works in both types of game, although suited to early, character-building scenes in a campaign.

A problem with this opening is that the NPC needs a legitimate reason for calling on the player. An NPC is unlikely to be aware of any Cthulhu-Busting activities, so an approach needs to be 'innocent.' Thus "Hey guys, I know you're psychic investigators so can you come and deal with this 'Thing I'm having trouble with?'" doesn't work, while "Hey prof, I've discovered these stone blocks in my garden, can you come and take a gander?" does.

However, the main drawback of this approach is in group play. It works very well in a one-on-one situation, with a single player-character called in for some reason. In a group situation, it is difficult to justify the appearance of the entire group until the juices really start flowing.

Chosen

In many campaigns it can be difficult to bring the characters together, ensuring a good balance of skills and abilities, without appearing too contrived. If a campaign concerns the rise of a particular evil and the long struggle to thwart it, then the characters might be special somehow: Chosen.

Together because they are destined to fight horror, exactly how the characters gather is up to the Keeper. Examples include being 'seen' by a psychic, discovering their portraits in a painting, their names in an ancient text, or just coming together at a fortuitous time.

This works well in supernatural adventures against 'traditional' villains. The characters have been selected by fate to battle against the rise of the Evil Ones. Some characters might even turn out to have psychic abilities, but all have been selected for whatever task lies ahead.

In a long campaign, their true task might not be revealed for some time, hidden at first behind several smaller battles. Special 'powers' might not manifest themselves until required, and the game can build to a really big grand finale.

A special type of Chosen, Jonahs are people to whom things just happen. The strange and mysterious seem to be drawn to these people. Demons stop and chat, vampires live in their cellars, and doorways leading to strange dimensions just fling themselves open at their passing. Jonahs are the sorts of people who are served by the werewolf-librarian, or stop for petrol at the filling station served by zombies.

If there is a Jonah in the party (and it is a decision the Keeper should make – just let the players figure out why all the fun seems to happen to one of them) then he can be used as an excuse for just about anything.

The Big One

The rise of R'lyeh, Azathoth's arrival, the Deep One invasion of Manchester. Something so huge, so awful, that it affects the entire population. This type of opening is quite dramatic, events overtaking everything and sweeping the characters into adventure. The players can be anyone, struggling to cope now that their world has been turned inside out.

The climax to a campaign differs in that the investigators should be in a position to thwart (or at least hinder) the Bad Guys.

Using The Big One as an opening puts the players in a bad position. Things are bad enough for them normally, but now it is worse.

Their aims should be much clearer however: To Put Things Right.

A campaign like this might start after a previous one has failed. New characters, but the same menace – only this time much stronger!

The Big One in a one-night-stand needs to be smaller, and less of a problem. Such as visiting an Aunt and discovering that her village has been overrun by Serpent People. It is still a shock, and the characters still have to cope, but it will only take a few hours of gaming to resolve. Anything really big requires a lifetime of gaming to solve.

A campaign, in fact.

Nightmares

One of the characters starts having horrific nightmares, all of which become true. Nightmares are great in any situation, as a fiendish Keeper can do horrible things to the poor characters time and again. However, to work as an opening, a nightmare must be prophetic.

A character with prophetic dreams is a valuable resource provided the experience doesn't send him screaming to the asylum.

Nightmares can be used to start any adventure, and best work in conjunction with another opening. They can also be used to bring a replacement character into a campaign – perhaps the other investigators were seen in a dream.

This works best in a campaign, where such an advantage can be used to good effect. Of course, there may be nasty side-effects, such as violent mood swings, schizophrenia, and firestarting.

Revenge

What has happened to next door's cat? Who broke in but did not steal anything? Why is frogspawn coming out of the taps?

Something is going on, but what? Harassment such as this tends to indicate a particular type of adventure has begun: Revenge. A past, still living (or resurrected), foe decides to put an end to their troublesome meddling and launches an all out assault. Obviously this is a campaign-only option.

Foes can play it two ways, either an all-out frontal assault, or a subtle game of

suspense and paranoia. The assault allows the keeper to hurl wave after wave of monsters at the players, but suspense and paranoia can be more fun.

An Accidental Blunder

In which our intrepid heroes stumble accidentally across an ancient horror so awful they put their lives at risk in order to stop it. This might be uncovering a plot to dig up an

old Star Spawn, or finding out that the shy, reclusive neighbour is actually a Mi-Go in disguise. In some cases it can be similar to *The Big One*.

Accidental Blunders, particularly dramatic ones, work superbly in one-night-stands.

In a campaign it only works once, perhaps at the start to get the ball rolling. It is better if a seasoned group find clues pointing towards its existence rather than blunder across it – too much accidental footwork strikes of Keeper manipulation – or perhaps there's a Jonah in the party.

In this sense, random encounters fall into this section. Random encounters simply do not happen in a horror campaign. Encounters need to be carefully crafted to suit the situation.

The Reading of the Will

In which a dear departed relative leaves something rather rotten to one of the investigators. Such as a mysterious statue, an old book or sinister artefact.

Heirlooms serve two purposes. In a one-night-stand, or at the start of a campaign, they serve to be the focus of an adventure. Half way through a campaign these are

less successful – how many uncles with mysterious pasts can the investigators have? Instead, it is better if the investigators receive the odd piece of information or equipment, perhaps the odd sum of money from grateful individuals.

An entertaining alternative for modern investigators is to receive a package from one of their 1920s counterparts. This might contain all sorts of information, including bits and pieces stolen from a dozen old scenarios. Perhaps the players recognise the name?

Expeditions into the Unknown

To darkest Peru, the bottom of the sea, an uncharted island, or even the moon. An expedition takes the characters from comfortable suburbia to the exciting unknown.

In a one-night-stand, this often turns into An Accidental Blunder when it is discovered that the ancient ruin (or whatever the target of the expedition is) is not quite so dead as was expected. Dedicated Investigators can find out that the expedition is going to discover more than it bargained for, and then do their best to be invited. In a campaign, the group might even want to initiate an expedition – but that's another adventure.

The Object

Something found in pre-Cambrian ice, or a painting in a gallery, triggers off an adventure. Perhaps a specialist knows there is something unusual, or perhaps it falls into the player's hands and something wants it back. Good occultist objects can be found in museums or at auctions, such as the dagger in *Thoth's Dagger*.

An object starting a one-night-stand needs to have something dynamic happen to it immediately. In a campaign it can be lying around for ages before its potential is realised, and this can occur at a quite inconvenient time. In both is important that someone sooner or later recognises the object for what it is worth.

Books and tomes are also objects, but tend to be prizes more than anything. However, books should be carefully crafted by a Keeper and not simply handed out like treats to a popular pet. The knowledge inside should be potent, and if carelessly managed can lead to a range of misadventures.

Certain situations work best with certain people. Both the players and the characters, as well as the type of game,

should be considered when deciding upon a particular opening. Sometimes it is best to use two or three simultaneously, just to make sure.

Published scenarios can sometimes prove a problem. Their openings are sometimes quite unsuitable for groups other than the original playtesters. A good scenario will have several ways in which the characters can become involved. Alternatively, one way a Keeper can understand more about a published adventure is to rework the opening to suit.

Openings should be fun, and a little thought can make them so.

Steve Hatherley is also the creator of **Tales of Terror**, a collection of adventure seeds for *Call of Cthulhu* and other roleplaying games. For more details visit www.talesofterror.net