



Cthulhu How?



So you want to play a Horror RPG with Cthulhu...

[Maybe there is a movie you can watch instead.](#)

You can simply buy the rules and play the adventure in the back.. Sadly Chaosium no longer provides the quickstart for free.

You're still here? Hm. Maybe this will work...

<http://www.miskatonic-university.org/>

<http://www.esotericarchives.com/>

<http://www.scp-wiki.net/>

<http://www.palinola.com/projects/lab/greenbox/>

<http://paranormaldatabase.com/>

http://thefearmythos.wikia.com/wiki/The_Fear_Mythos_Wiki

<http://www.creepypasta.com/dear-abby/>

<http://www.cthulhulives.org/toybox/PROPDOCS/FreeProps.html>

Last chance?

<http://suptg.thisisnotatrueending.com/archive/12130366/>

Perhaps my questionable qualifications can discourage you. I have been playing Call of Cthulhu and some other Horror genre RPGs for barely 10 years, have been the GM of lousy convention games, played LARP and online Horror rounds with morons and idiots, and have been an occasional OP on /tg/ for over 5 years now. Beyond that I have been working with movie props on set and off (nothing you have seen) and I dabble in game design but am not getting shit done.

Written in 2013

Alright, let's see. Once upon a ferociously thunderous night...

H.P. Lovecraft

It all goes back to the life's work of this Rhode Island racist who wrote a lot of weird stories and letters up to 1937 when he died from cancer without literary success: Howard Phillips Lovecraft.

His pen pal August Derleth founded Arkham House and published what Lovecraft had not been able to sell, as well as other works by different authors in the same vein, including his own.

The stories are mostly short episodes about disturbing unnatural events in some corner of our world beyond human perception or understanding full of old and mighty beings whose very existence is so far removed from our reality and scale that merely a glimpse of that lore drives a lot of characters to insanity or a pitiful demise. The entirety of Lovecraft's works and those of many others paying homage to his ideas form the [Cthulhu Mythos](#). It is not a consistent continuity but a collection of frequently mutually exclusive fragments. Have a look, it works in interesting ways.

<http://hplovecraft.com/> (complete works)

Lovecraft's intention was to unsettle his audience. He did not just write creepy tales, he designed them so that they would affect the reader. For this he used any device at his disposal. Plot, pacing, language, implication, subconscious association, he was more like a modern movie director than a contemporary author in what he attempted to achieve.

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More than just Lovecraft

Lovecraft: The universe is older, bigger, and weirder than anyone could ever imagine. Mankind is insignificant. There is no good or evil, or any other ordering structure man can grasp except might. And people who glimpse a shadow of these old powers are like a snowflake in a furnace.

Derleth: Man and his morale can prevail. There are malicious things lurking in every dark crevice as there always have been. But humans carry a spark in them that can at times overcome the deepest darkness and shine into every corner with compassion and safety in numbers. Or it can fail and be infested by the evil it was charged to dispel.

Poe: At night the most mundane circumstances can construct demons in our minds, and those demons kill. This creates an overlap, an ambiguity, and anyone caught in this paradox will either fashion his own demise out of fear and mistrust, or explain away the perceived threat only to then be overcome by it.

Shelley: There is infinite beauty and truth to be found in the most unlikely and revolting places. But unable to overcome fear and revulsion man cannot grasp that wisdom and himself becomes the monster in his efforts to protect against them.

Eco: (sneaked him in there) Every mind constructs the world from individual experience, and although seemingly coherent at the surface, expectations and context differ wildly from individual to individual. In this chasm madness is born and carried into the world as lies, cruelty, and murder. Over generations this becomes an ordering principle to the pitiful demise of the innocent, the inspired, and the honest.

Use what you think is best. Lovecraft Mythos roleplaying is not limited to Chaosium's Call of Cthulhu and Call of Cthulhu is not limited to the Lovecraft Mythos. Just be aware of where it all came from. As long as you do not start mapping dungeons on graph paper with encounters to be fought and loot to be taken you should be fine. And even if you do, I am sure it could work somehow.

Chaosium's Call of Cthulhu

Since 1981 Chaosium has released 7 editions of Call of Cthulhu (CoC) using the Basic Roleplaying System (BRP). The editions do not differ much in crunch and are fully compatible as far as I have seen.

Players roll standard attributes and select skills from a list that is on every character sheet. Any skills including weapon skills and even sanity are expressed in numbers from 0 to 100+ (masters of their field can sometimes exceed 100). Any task including combat is resolved with a d100 roll that is interpreted to be as good a result as the amount the roll is below the skill value. It is very simple and quick to play.

The GM can have a character roll directly against an attribute value when no skill fits the task. There are also secondary attributes derived from the primary ones. Things like Power (magic) or Luck can be tested with dice. But these details are of minor relevance and only involve a tiny bit of math at character generation.

It is a system very flexible in genre from cave men to astronauts, just adapt the skill list and you are ready to play. But the scope of the mechanics and the ways to express characters are limited to mostly skills. Backgrounds only find expression in skill cost, there is no mechanism to motivate players to use character flaws, no way for players to insert details into the plot, and the sanity stat is a bit too one dimensional in some cases. Combat is deadly and somewhat random.

The beauty of CoC is in the fluff. Chaosium has mastered the art of providing elaborate settings and adventures with superb handouts that lavish in the era from the late 19th to the early 20th Century. Little islands of dread in a world changing at a scary pace with ingenuity, art, even decadence at its iconic pinnacle while vast parts of the world remain to be mapped - which means exploited - and war looms over every continent... It is a very nice game.

Even if you pick another system to play, the CoC splats are the best in the industry and are a great resource for any GM setting up a flavorful game in the era.

Systematic Intimidation

You can of course use any system you like and play anything you want with it. But some make it easier or put the focus on certain things that might matter to your group. So let's have a look at the field and make sure to pick the right crunch for you.

Delta Green (<http://www.delta-green.com/>)

Imagine CoC in a modern world with aliens. Delta Green is a BRP system by ArcDream and Pagan to run agents of a vast and confusing conspiracy along the lines of the mysterious Blue Planet Project book (<http://www.metatech.org/BluePlanetProject.pdf>) with Greys, Majestic-12, Area 51, but also plenty of Mythos lore, that secretly runs the world and does so rather badly. Hopefully 2014 will finally bring a new edition, the devs have been blogging for years.

Laundry (<http://www.cubicle7.co.uk/our-games/the-laundry/>)

Charles Stross (<http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/>) is writing his novels about an IT nerd working for the most secret British Agency which is innocuously called The Laundry for historical reasons and because Her Majesty's Occult Service just would not do. Between mathematical magic threatening his sanity and a complex public service bureaucracy doing much of the same he hunts down loose gorgons and renegade cultists with a smartphone full of magic apps and a tendency to navigate the ensuing chaos with an intuitive understanding. Cubicle7 has molded that in BRP.

Cthulhu Dark (<http://catchyourhate.com/files/Cthulhu%20Dark.pdf>)

A one page RPG by Graham Walmsley that is very useful for a prepared plot with branches and multiple possible endings. It uses just one simple mechanic for everything including fights which can be a lot like the great Don't Rest Your Head (<http://www.evilhat.com/home/dont-rest-your-head-2/>) In that you risk sanity to succeed. Degrees of success give you power in the story but too much can again damage your sanity.

Try DRYH! It's not Mythos but it's really fucking good!

Trail of Cthulhu (<http://www.pelgranepress.com/site/?cat=10>)

Pelgranepress publishes this variation of the Gumshoe system (from Esoterrorists on the same website). It attempts to model an investigation so that the players cannot miss vital clues because of bad luck with the dice. Generally it seems to come out less scary and more pulpy. This is where Old Man Henderson is still looking for his wee men. (http://id4chan.org/wiki/Old_Man_Henderson).

Nemesis (<http://www.arcdream.com/pdf/Nemesis.pdf>)

The One Roll Engine (ORE) does just that, it resolves the entire round of a character with one roll of a simple dice pool. Into that pool go stats, skills, but also pretty much anything else you design your game to do, like Relationships in Monsters and Other Childish Things (http://www.rpgnow.com/product_info.php?cPath=&products_id=91119&affiliate_id=48458). It has a fun gambling mechanic and is very fast. ArcDream's Nemesis invents the variation Dark ORE which incorporates the brilliant Madness Meter from Unknown Armies (<http://www.atlas-games.com/unknownarmies/>). It provides generic Horror roleplaying in any setting but comes with only a few Mythos creatures as examples. Due to some overlap with the Delta Green developers there is hope that this ingenious system will catch a lot more Mythos in coming years.

Dread (http://www.tiltingatwindmills.net/dread/dread_quickstart_letter.pdf)

For very quick and very dirty games of Horror there is always Dread. A Jenga tower is used to replace dice. Players have to move blocks up the tower. If the tower falls the character dies. This gives the game a steady pace of increasing tension resulting in frequent character demise. Trying to unnerve other players before oneself has to handle the shaky tower should they succeed at it is not unheard of...

Lovecraft created countless tropes and left traces of his work in virtually every RPG published, from Great Old Ones in Pathfinder to entire books that revolve around moving the Mythos into Science Fiction. There are also systems like Savage Worlds, Gurps and D20 that get modded for everything. But they go beyond the scope of this guide.

Dungeoncrawl below Dunwich?

How does it all come together? How to create an atmosphere of titillating despair with a table of dice virgins, or worse, experienced Paladins and Troubleshooters?

It is a different kind of RPG and although there are stats and attack rolls you really have to look beyond a simple encounter game and cultivate an atmosphere.

Setting is central. Much of CoC is about well portrayed locations and their cultural, historical, or scientific relevance. It builds on these backdrops and contrasts their radiance with the abyss of infinity and madness. This reduces humanity as a whole to a fluke, and all its glory to inconsequential happenstance in the face of older powers.

Limit the scope. It is always normality - little weird - imminent end of the world - death or madness. If you allow steps in between or beyond you get Pulp not Horror. Characters will get savvy and the Mythos will creep into their arsenal. Player character parties tend to act aloof and purely utilitarian. Do not allow it. Involve them in the story and focus on individual struggle with reason and emotion. Roll SAN checks.

Prep scenes not battles. In D&D an NPC name and some combat stats is enough to start playing. In CoC you usually deal with a conspiracy or secret ritual of some kind, this needs foreshadowing. Never portray NPCs as 'the bad guys', always maintain some ambivalence and doubt. Trust is more important than damage per round. Play up innuendo and shifty looks. Position your NPCs instead of burning them off in combat. Combat in general should be a last resort and never a way for the PCs to dominate. Combat creates problems, it does not solve them. Even a victory always comes with a serious drawback because of escalation. But getting the chief of police to believe what your characters have witnessed and act upon it without going insane, that is a real battle in CoC terms.

No name dropping. Keep it vague. You do not start with the identification of a Mythos Horror, your characters never see it and the cultists call it The Great Inscrutable Master.



One shots only! No fluff holds up to epic heroes and remains Horror. Tease with fluffy details, use era as plot device, but do not explain everything. Establish mystery.

Describe sensory impressions, never foregone conclusions. I will get into this further below. As a basic rule this is probably the most important part of getting players involved. Do not think for them, just see for them!

Rely on suspense rather than effects. Roleplaying is not a visual medium, and split second timing for jump scares is almost impossible at the table. You have to work with narration.

Make the individual characters matter. The trick is to not have a sudden need for a certain character that then passes, but to foreshadow and maintain that need throughout the story

Never play an irrelevant scene. If a player veers off course just give him what he wants, make the scene relevant, or show him the brick wall. Nothing kills Horror faster than boredom.

Art is important. Handouts can be crucial. If your players have never seen a Necronomicon (<http://www.goominet.com/lovecraft/>) then how should its mention unsettle them? Soundtrack can be useful. Beyond actual creepy music there is [NASA's Symphonies of the Planets](#) and [Conet Project's numbers stations](#). 'Slowed' is a good search term for videos.

Allow no food at the table. Food offers displacement and satisfies the creature inside. Sugary and caffeinated drinks make players jittery, that can be productive. But food is always bad.

Work with your players. No two groups play the same game the same way. Be flexible and contrive a great game for everyone.

Plot Structure of Despair

The basic setup is usually that something old is discovered by somebody else out of chance or curiosity. That person is then corrupted by its implications, effects, or powers, and we now call him a cultist. This cultist has a detrimental influence on society (people disappear, grave robbing, hypnotized or scared victims, unworldly weather, poisonous dreams, livestock dies, running for president, portal that swallows reality, whatever). Traces of this is what puts the players on the map. Now they have to navigate this mind shattering evidence and its trail and possibly recover somebody's brother or old college friend.

They never actually have to find the thing that caused it all, but they can. The story is in all the damage it has caused and how that hints at more to come. This is slowly revealed to the players as they dive down the rabbit hole.

Isolate the group. All CoC adventures do this. The most obvious way is to cut them off geographically. They are on a polar research station and the next supply ship is not due until next week. They are in a remote estate and do not know the path through the surrounding treacherous woodlands. They are on a vessel at sea, on a moving train, or on a sailing airship. This does of course not work everywhere. You cannot be isolated geographically in London, Casablanca, Budapest, or Warsaw.

So you use social isolation. Simply by what they have seen the player characters are bound together because they know, and nobody else believes. Try to explain and NPCs laugh at your joke, insist and they start worrying about your sanity, act out and they take you to a doctor, keep insisting and the loony bin awaits. Or they can get really scared themselves...

The characters can run away. But in doing so they inevitably doom the world including themselves to be overcome by whatever horror they failed to stop when it could still be overcome.

The world is entirely modular. If every creature and deity CoC offers was in contact with humanity then humanity would be long gone. You just pick a setting and come up with something abysmal behind the scenes. You do not even have to define which creature is involved, it can be vague to the end, it can be a book or a relic. I once had a character destroy Paris with a *wrong* flute. He played the song that got stuck in his head during a dream.

The fun is in the flavor, the setting, and the utter helplessness. Archeology in 1860s Egypt, safari in 1870s South Africa, Voodoo in 1880s New Orleans, black market relics in 1890s Shanghai, exploration of the 1900s Amazon basin, bogged down in WW1 Verdun, gangster wars in Prohibition Chicago, weird science in 1930s Berlin... CoC is about an era. Find your place in it and show it to your players.

[Wikipedia](#) is your friend. Common misconceptions and corporate whitewashing work for you, and using the players' primary research tool against them is a great effect. You can derive your solution from Wikipedia and your players will think they are brilliant when they stumble upon it. But even just to fluff out the setting it can be very useful

Most CoC books stick very close to historical accuracy. Combine them with actual sources and references, steal [old photographs](#), find [old radio broadcasts](#), or use some ancient story your grandfather told you as plot inspiration. You can also just call it Arkham or Dunwich and invent it all.



Mindfuck

...Ere the waning and fantastically gibbous moon had risen far above the eastern plain, I was awake in a cold perspiration, determined to sleep no more ...

Lovecraft intentionally used unsettling or unfamiliar language in his descriptions to influence the reader's state of mind. This does not translate directly into narration. But language can create subtle **dissonances** that lead to subconscious expectation. If used with care it can give your players perceptions and experiences they did not anticipate, and they usually appreciate that. You can use malapropisms or foreshadow with outright misplaced adjectives.

Know your players. Watch them carefully. It is like poker, when one blinks, you got him. Everyone has different phobias or anxieties. Many are hard to recreate in narration. There are neuro-linguistic **programming** tricks you can use, but it is always a long shot.

Every player has a primary mnemonic sense. Smell is the first candidate, it is very close to the lizard brain core and fight/flight. You often recognize him because he draws deep breaths through the nose or smells his fingers when nervous, he inspects food by smell before tasting it. His displacement actions tend to include his nose. You get him immersed by becoming his sommelier, you learn to describe the world to his nose. Check wine reviews and pick up adjectives for aromas. To unnerve this player light some incense.

The second likely primary mnemonic sense is hearing. This player often gets annoyed when too many people talk at once and he is the first to jump at unexpected sounds. You get him immersed by making him use his ears for playing and for imagining his character. You whisper when an NPC talks to him. You describe sounds in detail just for atmo, but also to hint at plot. You explain how his character is affected by some sudden noise when it fits your plot. It is important to leave some ambivalence when describing faint or foreign sounds, keeps it exciting. And describe volume and direction, influence of wind or structures, anything to give sound plasticity.

Similar things can be done for vision and haptics. But you get how it works: Find out which sense each player uses for memory the most and then play into it. Do not be too obvious or the player will feel manipulated and abandon immersion.

As for actual **fears**, it works just the same. Claustrophobia, agoraphobia, acrophobia, arachnophobia, ophidiophobia, pyrophobia, tryphophobia, Body Horror, ghosts, death, ... Just find their buttons and push them. Gently at first, and then increasing with the pace of your plot.

In a Horror game your biggest issue is always pacing. All given suggestions only work if the timing is right. The pressure you put on the players in their understanding of the world creates the framework upon which the entire plot depends. To utilize that you need two things: An ability to read your players' immersion, and plot devices to regulate tension.

The first takes experience and empathy. Look for general conversational clues like displacement behavior (tapping, chewing, drinking, scratching) and listen to their tone of voice. Take a baseline at the beginning of the session and then slide it up incrementally. Do not overdo it at first, you want increasing waves of tension. The valleys are as important as the peaks, without relief and contrast you just get action.

The second is all in the prep work. Give yourself room to react in your adventure and divide it up into natural seeming steps. Do not give away too much too soon, it will not increase tension at all. Instead foreshadow and provide clues, take away options over time, and make the general situation ever more dire in increments that can be felt by the players. This is where table lighting and soundtrack can be your best friends.

Horror films with broken continuity still work. Logic subsides to immediacy. Human perception is a heuristics machine, whatever is most pressing in implication dominates, and causality be damned! So do not get held up by details. All that matters is to keep the players on their toes and the suspension of disbelief generally maintained.