



KEEPER'S SECTION

Welcome, Keeper. Your job is to guide the Investigators through the horror and help everyone have fun.

You have two jobs. You are a performer: you present something to horrify and inspire the players. And you are a facilitator: you help the players to tell their stories, as their Investigators experience unimaginable horror.

Imagine yourself as an artist, who gives the players a half-finished canvas. You wash it with dark colours, with glowing patches of alien beauty. You give hints of lurking horrors. Then you let them complete the painting.

Most importantly, your job is to creep the players out. Aim, not for full-blown terror, but for a lingering uneasiness. And do this for real: try for a horror that makes everyone, you and them, genuinely uncomfortable.

It isn't about evil monsters with waving tentacles. It isn't about chanting cultists. It's about the things that creep us out, that drive us mad, that make us lose control.

COSMIC HORROR

Cthulhu Dark tells stories of **cosmic horror**: that is, tales of Investigators who discover that humans are insignificant, because they are powerless against greater forces in the Universe.

These greater forces are **the Mythos**, which consists of ancient aliens, artifacts and other horrors. Long before humanity existed, the aliens came to Earth, built great cities and left the artifacts behind.

Everything about these creatures is beyond our understanding. They are huge, ancient, hyperintelligent and powerful. Their geometry, mathematics, writing and technology are beyond us. Our science, technology and academic writing does not mention these creatures: they are only alluded to in ancient writings, whispered folktales and crank publications.

Yet the Mythos is not just a collection of aliens and other entities. On a deeper level, **the Mythos** is the terrifying truth, the underlying horror beneath the universe, which is beyond human comprehension.

Because of this, everything about the Mythos is repellent to us. When we encounter something from the Mythos, it appears evil, repulsive and inexplicably wrong.

These two meanings of the Mythos, “ancient, powerful alien entities” and “the terrifying reality underlying the Universe”, are connected. The more you understand the alien entities, the more you perceive the horror underlying the universe. The more you perceive the underlying horror, the more you see and understand the ancient, alien entities.

In Cthulhu Dark, this understanding is called **Insight**. When your Insight is low, you see and believe the mundane reality around you. When your Insight is high, you see beyond that reality and comprehend the horror of the universe.

Every time you see something disturbing, your Insight increases: your mind opens a little more and helps you see the universe as it truly is. Eventually, when your Insight reaches 6, you fully understand the horror behind reality and your mind breaks. Your job, as Keeper, is to help the Investigators along this journey.

MYSTERIES AND COSMIC HORROR

To do this, you guide the players through a **mystery**: a horror story, in which the Investigators glimpse the Mythos and begin to understand the true nature of reality.

In every mystery, Investigators discover dark and powerful Mythos forces, beyond their understanding or control. These Mythos forces might take the form of an ancient and terrifying creature, a mind-bending artifact, unearthly sorcery or something else. The Investigators realise these Mythos forces are vastly more powerful than them: that is, the Investigators experience cosmic horror.

To put this another way: every mystery is ultimately about **hubris**. It is about the Investigators’ overconfidence in their own importance, which is undermined when they encounter the horror, showing them they are insignificant. At the start of the mystery, the Investigators believe they are powerful, intelligent people who understand the universe. As the mystery unfolds, they realise they have been deceiving themselves.

THE THEMES AND THE THREAT

Mysteries are not just about cosmic horror, but about more human topics: pregnancy, hunger, abduction, fear of the sea, fear of the dark, fear of your body changing. These are the **themes** of the mystery.

To explore these themes, every mystery contains a specific **threat** from the Mythos, such as an alien, artifact or sorcerous spell. This threat is the source of the horror, which the Investigators will confront.

Under “Writing a Mystery”, we’ll explore themes and threats in more detail. Under “Threats of the Mythos”, you’ll find full descriptions of Mythos threats.

THE HOOK AND THE FINAL HORROR

Every mystery starts with a **hook**, a dramatic event to pull the Investigators into the mystery.

It ends with a **final horror**, which is the reason behind everything that the Investigators have discovered. You can write the final horror in a sentence or a few sentences: for example, “The Mi-Go have been kidnapping children”.

We’ll discuss these further under “What is the final horror?” on page 23 and “How does it start?” on page 24.

SETTING AND THE POWER

Every mystery has a **setting**, the time and place that provides the backdrop for the story. For example, a mystery might be set in New York at the height of the Great Depression, Spain during the Civil War or modern day Bangkok. You can use the example settings in this book or invent your own.

In every setting, someone has **power**. For example, in Victorian London, the gentlemen of the aristocracy have power, along with scientists, traders and the Church. In Mumbai 2037, those with money and those who were born into a high position in society hold the power. Power is often about money, government or social class.

In Cthulhu Dark, the Investigators are people with little power. They might be thieves, housewives or dockworkers. They might be skilled people, such as teachers, carpenters or nurses. But they won’t be aristocrats, tycoons or those in government.

By contrast, the horror is close to the power in some way. For example, in Victorian London, the Investigators might uncover a horror in a university, bank or church. In Mumbai 2037, the horror might be in a technology company or relic of the British Empire.

LOVECRAFT

Cthulhu Dark draws on the writings of H P Lovecraft, together with earlier authors that inspired him and later writers inspired by him.

Lovecraft wrote his stories in the 1920s and 1930s. His standard setting is New England in the United States, especially the fictional city of Arkham, although his stories sometimes venture elsewhere.

While Lovecraft was a superb crafter of horror, he had a blinkered view of humanity. Today, his work often comes across as racist. His protagonists were mostly dull, interchangeable middle-class men.

When you play, try to move beyond this. Tell stories about a wider range of people than Lovecraft did. If you do, you’ll discover you have more stories - and more interesting stories - to tell.

WRITING A MYSTERY

This chapter tells you how to write a Cthulhu Dark mystery.

You don't need to follow the sections of this chapter in order. Instead, skip back and forth, as you design your mystery. For example, if the first idea you have is for a setting, start at that section, then plan the rest of the mystery around it.

This chapter works in conjunction with "Playing the mystery" below. Use them together. As you write the mystery, think about how it will play. As you play the mystery, use the tips on writing to make it more fun.

WHAT IS THE MYSTERY ABOUT?

Choose something that inspires you, which you are excited to explore with your players.

Ask yourself: what scares you? What makes you uneasy? Is it a part of your body, a place you have visited, something that has happened in the news? If so, try writing a mystery about a horror that infects the body, lurks in the place you visited or lies behind the news event. Do you worry about your loved ones, your health, your family? Then write about horrors that turn your loved ones against you, leech your health or take children away.

Or ask yourself: is there a subject you are interested in? Are you fascinated by history: the Partition of India, the Reconquista, the Opium Wars? Or do you like childhood fairytales: fairies, unicorns, something hiding under the bed? Or are you drawn to an artistic movement: flamenco, minimalism or the early jazz scene in New Orleans? Whatever interests you, try writing a mystery about it.

Or is there a story you want to tell? Do you want tales of body horror, grand conspiracies or human temptation? Do you want a story about European travel, time travel or space travel? Then write a mystery about that.

WHEN AND WHERE IS IT SET?

If you haven't already, decide the setting for your mystery.

To do this, think of the story you want to tell. For example, if you want to write about a horror that infects the body, then try Victorian London as a setting, with its hospitals and public displays of surgery. If your mystery is about people betraying those they love, then why not set the story in modern suburbia? If your mystery is about flamenco, try Seville at the beginning of the 20th Century. For a story about human temptation, what about Las Vegas, in the glamorous 1950s?

Alternatively, you might use Lovecraft's favourite setting of New England, perhaps the city of Arkham or the remote countryside. This is a good setting, blending modern and ancient, familiar and strange, and many players are familiar with it. If you use it, make it your own. Draw inspiration from cities, towns and countryside that you know.

Whichever setting you choose, think of interesting places, people and things the Investigators might find there. For example, in Victorian London, they might find an imposing hospital, a wood-panelled gentleman's club and the twisting alleyways of the East End slums. You'll use these things later in the mystery (see "Locations" on page 25).

For the rest of this chapter, our default setting is London 1851, under the reign of Queen Victoria. This setting is detailed below (see "London 1851" on page 59), together with a full scenario. You'll also find a full scenario, Screams of the Children. Many examples in this chapter are similar to that scenario (although, to avoid spoiling surprises, not identical).

FINDING THE HORROR

From what you know about your mystery so far, what is the thing that unsettles you or scares you? That thing will become the horror. You'll represent it as an alien threat.

For example, let's say your mystery is set in London 1851. Ask yourself: what unsettles you about Victorian London? Is it hunger, the Church, the destruction of the slums? Whatever it is, make

it into a horrific threat. For example, if hunger is the thing that unsettles you, try writing about a creature stalking London, which starves people as it touches them.

Or let's say your mystery is about people betraying those they love. What unsettles you about that? Is it the idea that you can never fully know those you love? Then turn that into an alien horror. For example, try writing about the Investigators' loved ones being possessed by an alien creature.

As you do this, think about the power in the setting. Wherever the power lies, associate the horror with the power, rather than with people without power. For example, if you are writing a scenario about Victorian London, you might put the horror in the Church of England or the Houses of Parliament. But avoid associating the horror with the slums or the workhouse.

With that in mind, here is another way to think about the horror. Think where the power lies in your setting, ask what unsettles you about that power, then make your horror about that. For example, if your scenario is in Victorian London and you are unsettled by the power of the Church, make your horror about the Church. Perhaps there is a monstrous, charismatic priest or an ancient creature lying beneath a Cathedral.

THEMES

Now, think about the themes of your mystery: the topics you will explore, the types of fear you will play with, the things that your story is really about.

Write them down. You'll probably have between one and three themes. They should be human, emotional topics, which might scare, worry or obsess ordinary people: for example, fear of aging, fear of your body changing, fear of infection, fear of not knowing those you love, hunger, pregnancy, abduction, social class.

Try to avoid specific historical themes, such as "The British Navy", "Slavery" or "The Aristocracy". If you're tempted by a theme like this, ask yourself what deeper human themes you would like to explore. For example, if your theme

is "The British Navy", would you like to explore fear of the sea, fear of military power or fear of confinement on board ship?

There are two themes that appear "by default" in Cthulhu Dark mysteries. First, the fear of losing your mind. Second, hubris: the discovery that you are not powerful, but powerless (see "Mysteries and cosmic horror" on page 20). If you like, explore these themes in your mystery too.

Once you have decided your themes, keep returning to them as you write and play the mystery. Hit them again and again, pushing those buttons, playing on those fears.

THE THREAT

Once you know your themes, choose a Mythos threat - an alien creature, an ancient artifact or something else - that echoes those themes.

For example, if you want a story about loved ones betraying you, what about the Mi-Go (see "Mi-Go" on page 53), who impersonate people, or the Great Race (see page 51), who possess people? If you want a story about hunger, what about a Colour (see page 47), which destroys crops, or Ghouls (see page 50), who feast on humans?

To choose a threat, see the list under "Threats of the Mythos" on page 47, or invent your own.

WHAT IS THE FINAL HORROR?

At the heart of your mystery, something is very, very wrong. This is your final horror.

Write a first idea for your final horror, based on everything you've done so far, especially your setting, themes and threat. For example, you might write "a serial killer preys on rich gentlemen", "there are creatures in the sewers of Victorian London", "an alien infection makes people hate those they love".

Once you've written your first idea, rewrite it, until it is as terrifying as you can make it. Here are some ways to do that.

Firstly, ensure your final horror **harms people**. For example, "there are creatures in the sewers of Victorian London" doesn't necessarily harm