Knives and Guns and Bombs, Oh my!

It is inevitable that if you play a role playing game, regardless of what type, you will have players that are gonna bring the weaponry, and bring it heavy. Not to say this is a bad thing, in fact many games are based on exactly that, bring a big gun and shoot it, often. In Call of Cthulhu however this is not really the style of play that gets results. Well I shouldn’t say that, it gets results, just not always the ones you wanted. Now it is well known that Call of Cthulhu is not a combat based game and that it focuses more on story than combat. I agree, but at the same time you will eventually have combat in a CoC game. There are times that it is unavoidable, and so, out come the guns. In most cases there are probably ways to avoid violence but when given the chance players will generally pull the guns before trying any other solution. Maybe it’s just human nature, it’s not like we as humans have a rich history of not resorting to violence.

That being the case, we know that there will be some combat, and that it will involve weapons of some sort, maybe it will be effective and maybe not. It is reasonable to expect the players to have weapons either on their person, or available, in a car or back at home. If they don’t have any, they will eventually find something in which to stab, bash, poke, shoot, slash, maim and otherwise cause bodily harm, to those who have bodies. That is not what this article is about however. The occasional hand gun or shotgun is reasonable and believable in most settings. Knives, sure lots of people carry knives, utility knives, pocket knives, and some people walk around with a big knife in a sheath on their belt, really its a thing. What we are talking about here though, is the excessive use and stock piling of ridiculous and uncommon weaponry.

Have you ever had a player who has a passion for guns or knives, heck maybe even bombs. If so you probably have had to tell said player no on more than one occasion. They may know more about their specific weapon fetish than you and so you can’t just hit them with a “they didn’t have those at this time.” If you do, you may get, “Well in 1918 the first bla bla bla was made by Sir William bla bla bla and so I can have one.” OK, now we are getting into the territory I am talking about. There are times when a weapon can be a huge detraction and really take away from the fun of the game. Most of the time weapons add to the game, and can cause some serious hilarity as the investigator attempts to use said weapon, and does so very poorly. There are times though when it just gets in the way.

For example lets say you allow someone to have a very high powered, fully automatic, belt fed, water cooled monster of a gun. It may be fun for that player to mow down the four ghouls you have hiding in the secret chamber of the house, but if that was your big climax for this scene, well now its over and none of the other investigators got to engage with them, on top of that all of the built tension is now just “meh.” So as much as you wanted to make that player happy with their super gun, you have now allowed the story to become less interesting. If we are of the mind that in Call of Cthulhu the story is king, well then we have just made a mess of it. Now the other players may be, cheering and enjoying the carnage, but have that same thing happen over and over and soon the game is no longer a horror game, it is just a hack and slash dungeon crawl. If that is what you came to the table for then maybe CoC is not the game for you, please catch the next Byakhee back home.

It is not enough that a weapon is available in the time period you are playing in, or that your characters profession would afford them the opportunity to access said weapon, if it is going to take away from the tension and by extension the horror of the game, don’t allow it. This is a horror game after all and we are supposed to be setting up some spooky scenes for the players to interact in, bring in a bazooka and it can take away from that. Again, that is not to say that some powerful weapon would not add to the story in a positive way, if so I say, let the investigators have at it. I do not believe in limiting the players enjoyment or creativity. For the most part, in my games, I let them do whatever they want. That has bitten me in the back side more times than I can count however and it is not always easy to try and recover from a game going off the rails. A good rule of thumb is to take a look at the story you have going, if some weapon will take center stage at a moment where you have some other key plot point which is supposed to be the main focus, then it is probably not something you want to allow. On the other hand if you have a situation where there is something that needs to be accomplished and it is beyond the abilities of the group itself, but a bomb might do the trick, well then, bombs away.

In Call of Cthulhu we try to create a sense of desperation and isolation. The feeling that what we are up against is beyond the ability of human comprehension and therefore beyond our capacity to fight with conventional means. There are minion type advisories that are not so, beyond our ability to fight, and these should be treated as such, if it bleeds it can be killed. Again I would caution against allowing even these minion creatures to be so easily dispatched by a barrage of machine gun fire. Reason being, you need these minions to seem powerful and daunting so that we can load the deck for the big boss monster that controls them. If you can easily kill the minions, well maybe big daddy isn’t so scary after all. Most CoC monsters have some sort of armor or protection against conventional weapons, so use it, don’t play nice with the investigators. If they think they can walk in with their Vickers and wrap the scenario up with one glorious hail of bullets, well then won’t they be surprised when the smoke clears and they have only downed three of the eight creeps in the basement.

Using a Mythos creature’s natural protection can really amp up the sense of human frailty in the game. I like to allow the players to have what they want within reason. There are times when a player will give a very compelling argument as to how and why it would be possible for their character to acquire some ridiculous weaponry. OK, thats fine, they can have it, but play the Mythos treat with some intelligence, if the players have had an encounter and used some weapon with much success, well, the next time the evil mastermind sends out an attack party have them summon something that has a natural ability to defend against said weapon. Your players will be reveling in their glory, patting themselves on the back for getting, and using, that flame thrower to mop up the zombies sent against them. Alls right with the world, until the Fire Vampires show up. You don’t have to always follow the scenario to the letter, your evil antagonist is smart enough to get this far, do you think these meddling investigators are so crafty that they can best big baddy so easily. No, change things up a bit. If the scenario calls for calls for Fire Vampires and the investigators have rigged up an awesome fire extinguishing apparatus which takes them out like its taking out the garbage, well, send in the Hunting Horror. That will teach them to bring a fire extinguisher to a teeth fight.

I am starting to sound like I am against the investigators using weapons to fight the forces of darkness. I am not, I like giving the players a chance to win the day, I do enjoy having them accomplish this through research and clever plans however. If they can do the research and come up with a plan that targets the vulnerabilities of their advisory, well then, kudos, go get em boys and girls. If the answer is just to, use a bigger hammer, well that is kind of a cop out and is a bit of a boar. This is the reason that I do not enjoy focusing to heavily on the heat the players will be packing. To me the game is the most fun when the investigators are unaware and have to adapt to the situation as it plays out. If your whole team is unarmed because, why the hell would they bring guns to checkout out a interesting artifact found at an archaeological dig site, they have to use what is provided to them. This can lead to the best of game situations. There is nothing like the day Professor Whimbley beat the ghoul to death with the iron skillet he found in the mess tent. Seriously doesn’t that sound better than, Professor Whimbley, who has been an academic all his life, walked in with a Maxim Gun and took out the ghoul. Well that actually sounds real good too but you get what I am saying. So be realistic with the weapons your players might have with them, they can always find more along the way, and if they are worried about not having their security blankets, just remind them that it is not always practical to pull around a trunk full of guns. I mean even Buffy the Vampire Slayer had to head back home to get stuff out of her trunk of slaying before going out for a big mission.

There are those players out there, god love em, who just will not relent. They have to have their armory and their wild, too heavy to carry, not realistic to their character, weapon of mass disruption. So let them have it, but also be realistic. How heavy is this thing, are they really going to be able to climb three flights of stares with it. Make them make CON rolls in such situations. Is this thing concealable, because I am pretty sure the cops will have something to say about the guy who is carrying the FIM-92 Stinger around town. Guns can be confiscated, lost, broken and any number of different unfortunate circumstances can befall them. Your player may also wind up in the slammer just by carrying the thing around. Also any weapon unique enough to make this type of player giddy is bound to be uniquely identified by the authorities. It is not like they see crime scenes every day where an automatic grenade launcher was used. Be tough but be fair, you don’t want to lose the player because you are always ruining their good time. If the big weapon is novel and interesting, go ahead have them use it, it might bring some interesting side plots into the game. Just be sure to not let it become the norm. If you do it will start to be the star of every game and will take away from the atmosphere.

In the end you are going to pit the investigators up against your main antagonist. This might be a powerful sorcerer, an abomination from outer space or a dark god who is ready to destroy all mankind. This is what the whole scenario has been building up to. Here it comes from out of the darkness to destroy them all, and the player says, “OK, I launch this missile thing at it and go for a sandwich.” Boo, that was no fun. So what can we do? Well, don’t let the statistics of your monster dictate everything here. If it makes sense and will be good for the story and the enjoyment of the game, then let it ride. If, however it is going to ruin the end that you have all been waiting for, then maybe change it up a bit. Maybe the weapon produces energy that only makes the thing stronger, or it is so immense that the explosion has no real affect or per chance this thing just sends the projectile into another dimension. Remember that those who sit at the top of the Mythos food chain are not necessarily playing by our laws of physics. This is the point, we shouldn’t always be able to use conventional means to get rid of the problem. If we are talking about Elder Gods or Old Ones than we most definitely wont be killing them out right. They can really only be damaged enough to leave this plane of existence, or maybe you only want them to be defeated by a spell that will close the gate or dismiss them in some way. Possibly there was a ritual which had called them forth and the only solution is to stop that ritual, kill the cultists preforming the ritual, destroy the artifact that is the catalyst for calling this horrible thing or maybe you just need to reverse the spell that was already cast. See, we didn’t fire a shot and we got rid of the thing, it also makes more sense that some all powerful being would be dismissed by some form of magic than by blowing it up.

So have fun with your games, but don’t let the tools dictate the story. Let the players have fun, but don’t let them ruin the mood just because they did an internet search for explosives in the 1920s. Make your threat truly threatening, and try to instill the sense of helplessness that is the core of the game. Remember this is a horror game, not an adventure game, it is supposed to be scary and the threat is supposed to feel unsurmountable. Remember too that running away is always a viable option. In Call of Cthulhu it is just as good to fail, and have the keeper explain the horrible events that are a result of that failure, as it is to win the day. So go forth and defeat the servants of darkness, but realize that it might only take a hidden phrase from an ancient tome, a clever switch of a potent magic artifact at the right time or a bit of poison slipped into the cult leaders wine. Knives, guns and bombs can be fun, but lets take some time to use our heads and leave them in the tickle trunk.