Knives and Guns and Bombs, Oh my!

It is inevitable when you play a role-playing game, regardless of what type, that you will have players who will bring the weaponry and bring it heavy. Not to say this is a bad thing. Many games are based on precisely that, carry a big gun, and shoot it often. In Call of Cthulhu, however, this is not 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. Still, when given a chance, players will generally pull the guns before trying any other solution. Maybe it's just human nature, and 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 useful and perhaps not. Players will want 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 handgun 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 stockpiling 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 significant distraction and take away from the fun of the game. Most of the time, weapons add to the game. They 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, let's 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 a player to mow down the four ghouls hiding in the secret chamber. Still, if that was your big climax for this scene, now it's over, and none of the other investigators got to engage them, and all the built tension is now just "meh." So as much as you wanted to make that player happy with their supergun, you have now allowed the story to become less appealing. 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. The other players may be cheering and enjoying the carnage, but if that happens over and over, 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 period you are playing in or that your character's profession would grant them to access the said weapon. If it is going to take away from the tension and horror of the game, don't allow it. It 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 positively, if so I say, let the investigators have at it. I do not believe in limiting the player's enjoyment or creativity. For the most part, in my games, I let them do whatever they want. That has bitten me in the backside 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 would be to take a look at the story you have. If a weapon will take center stage in place of another critical plot point that is 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 is beyond the abilities of the group, 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 we are up against something beyond the ability of human comprehension and 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 quickly dispatched by a barrage of machine gunfire. The 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 quickly kill the minions, well, maybe big daddy isn't so scary after all. Most CoC monsters have some 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, won't they be surprised when the smoke clears and only three of the eight creeps in the basement are dead.

Using a Mythos creature's natural protection can 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, that's fine, they can have it. Play the Mythos treat with some intelligence however. If the players have had an encounter and used some weapon with much success, the next time the evil mastermind sends out an attack party have them summon something that has a natural ability to defend against it. 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. All is right with the world until the Fire Vampires show up. You don't have to follow the scenario to the letter. Your evil antagonist was smart enough to get this far. Do you think these meddling investigators are so crafty that they can handily dispatch big baddy? No, change things up a bit. If the scenario calls for Fire Vampires and the investigators have rigged up an impressive fire extinguishing apparatus which takes them out like it's 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, and I like giving the players a chance to win the day. But I do enjoy having them accomplish this through research and cunning plans. If they can do the research and come up with a plan that targets the vulnerabilities of their advisory, well then, kudos, get em, boys and girls. If the answer is to use a bigger hammer, well, that is a bit of a boar. That is the reason I do not enjoy focusing 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 check out out an interesting artifact found at an archaeological dig site, they have to use what is on hand. That 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 Wimbley, who has been an academic all his life, walked in with a Maxim Gun, and took out the ghoul. Well, that sounds 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, 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 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 practical. How heavy is this thing, are they going to be able to climb three flights of stairs 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 is 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 exciting, go ahead have them use it, it might bring some interesting side plots into the game. Just be sure not to 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. That might be a powerful sorcerer, an abomination from outer space, or a dark god who is ready to destroy all humanity. That is what the whole scenario has been building up to. Here it comes from out of the darkness to kill 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 suitable 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. Perhaps the weapon produces energy that only makes the thing stronger, or it is so immense that the explosion has no real effect, or maybe this thing 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. That 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, then we most definitely won't be killing them outright. They can 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. The only solution is to stop that ritual, kill the cultists performing it, destroy the artifact that is the catalyst for calling this horrible thing, or maybe you 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 an all-powerful being would be dismissed by 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 genuinely threatening, and try to instill a 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 fun to fail, and have the keeper explain the horrible result, 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 let's take some time to use our heads and leave them in the tickle trunk.