Learning To Let Go

As a keeper, I am constantly molding the plot clay while the game is going. I tend to want the players to succeed, which I don’t believe is an uncommon keeping style, but I also don’t want them to walk through as if nothing can touch them. I enjoy the frailty of the Call of Cthulhu investigator. It gives a real sense of danger and excitement that I think lacks in other systems. At the same time it can really piss the players off when they are killed one turn into the first real action in the game. Success does not always mean death though, it can also mean stopping the big bad or saving the sacrificial victim or a whole host of other outcomes. Success to me also means moving the plot forward, finding the clues that get the investigators to the next scene. Nothing kills the mood more than the players sitting around trying to come up with a plan when they are not really sure what the hell they should be doing. Incoming idea rolls… boring.

I have also mistakenly tried to guide the players in the right direction, sometimes by force and sometimes with a gentle hand. Dropping hints, in NPC dialog is always a good way to go however sometimes if the jokes are flying the players will miss a clue that is too subtle. A simple slip of the NPCs tongue can be great if everyone is engaged but if you drop important clues that way it can end up being lost. Wait, Mr. Collins said what? Now no one understands this clue path that is so obvious in your mind that you begin getting frustrated. Your big reveal is going to get lost on everyone. Having an NPC offer help or push the players in a direction is a way to go as well, but this is fraught with danger. You can end up getting someone killed and now your fabulous NPC who the investigators are supposed to form tight bonds with is just, that asshole who’s plan got Carl Cant-sneak killed. Anyone who has attempted to endear Jackson Elias to his or her investigators as poorly as I did will understand the pain I’m talking about. Sometimes trying to get the players on track can be the worst thing for them. Sometimes you just have to let go and let the game take you where it wants to go.

Learning to let go is not easy but it can be the best experience you will ever have at the gaming table. I still find myself unable to take my own advice but when I eventually step back and just let things happen, the game begins to flow again. The first important thing to understand is time. If you are doing a one shot or a tournament style game you don’t have the time to let the players talk about the wallpaper or how wonderful the wine is. You can’t just say, “hey get back on topic we only have an hour left” because that would really spoil the mood, at the same time you can’t let the investigators run off to some other town on a misguided hunch. I good tool here is game time, or some jarring event. With game time you can set a perceived cut off time, it doesn’t even have to be legitimate but if you have the players thinking they only have till midnight to solve the case, they wont be driving out to visit the grandma of the butler of the friend of the NPC who actually matters. This also gives you a exit strategy if the game goes long. If there are five minutes left to play and the investigators have not made any headway, you can have that clock strike midnight and the malevolent horror devour the world. The other technique is a jarring event, nothing gets things back on track like a horrifying monster showing up to eat some tasty investigators. Or