We are all unique little snowflakes

Unlike many other role-playing games Call of Cthulhu tends to focus on the story being told and role-playing over character progression and combat. We have all heard that a million times I am sure but what does that really mean for the player. As a Keeper I know that the most interesting games are the ones in which the players truly become their characters and act accordingly. I get the ability to converse with a PC and have scenes that make sense as if we were watching a movie or listening to a radio drama. There are players out there who excel at this type of on your toes role-playing that provides a rich and interesting atmosphere for the scenario and keeps the other players interested while waiting for their chance to take the spotlight. It is always great to play with someone who stays in character most of the time and maybe even does accents or alters their normal voice to fit the character. That is all well and good but I would say that a larger number of role-playing game enthusiasts who have played many games for many years do not play in this manner. Which is totally understandable and acceptable, it is rare to find full blown actors and actresses out there who enjoy the theater of it and are willing to take the stage as it were. For some players it could be that they feel a bit embarrassed or shy about getting out there even though they play in a totally accepting environment. I understand that and that is what this article is all about. How can you provide good role-playing simply by building your character with flaws?

The first thing a Call of Cthulhu player must get passed is the idea that their cherished character will live on forever gaining power and knowledge eventually to retire after a long adventuring career. That is just not going to happen. More than likely you will be dead after the first few sessions and rolling up another character trying to figure out a good tie in for your new persona. It’s OK really, just let go and hope that your investigator has a truly epic and memorable death. The most you can hope for is to go out with a bang, maybe a literal bang, and take a few bad guys with you. If the players at your table remember your characters death after a few sessions have passed, then you have achieved a truly great thing. You now live on in the hearts and minds of the players you roll next to, session after session, it brings a tear to my eye.

So if your character is not going to live long and gain power and knowledge then what will set them apart? Well let’s take a look at many of the common characters that people build when they come to the table. Coming from other games make selecting a character a bit challenging because initially, we do not see what we are used to. There is no clear fighter, rogue, caster or healer types that help us fall into the role we would like to play. We see professions that call out to some of these roles but nothing that is as clearly defined. So what are the most popular beginning professions? I would say Private Investigator, Soldier, Doctor and Author/Journalist.

A lot of players new to the game will start with a Private Investigator. This is actually a great choice for a new character, they are generally tough, have weapons, and have a purpose. As a Keeper it is easy to integrate a P.I. you just give them a case to solve. Even if it’s not specific to the case the other investigators are on it is easy to have them cross paths. Most people have seen the movie P.I. and know what is expected of them. It’s an easy character to build and play.

The Soldier, much like the P.I. is tough, has weapons skills, and is generally easy to send off on a task or mission. Soldiers are a good beginner profession because they can transition into another profession with time. If there is no war to fight they are going need some kind of job so you can then mix the soldiers skills with skills from a new profession.

The Doctor is an obvious choice if you like playing a healer. In Call of Cthulhu this will not be what you are expecting. Doctors have the ability to pass out first aid and medicine rolls but are definitely not the healing machines that are present in other game systems. You can heal during combat but in most cases you will be stabilizing others so that you can get them to a hospital.

The Author or Journalist comes up as a choice for first timers I think because it is identifiable. Much like the P.I. we generally have our notions of an intellectual author who has the keen instincts to solve the case, or the hard-nosed journalist who does what it takes to get the story. Again these are a good choice for the beginner because it is pretty open as to what these characters would have interests in. It wouldn’t be unheard of for them to pack some heat and they also have the social skills to talk their way into and out of situations.

Once players are more advanced they may begin to delve into the other profession types and create even more unique professions from these. Most people don’t start off playing an Antiquarian or Professor since at first glance they may seem ill equipped to handle the rigors of an investigation. After playing the game for a while however players will find that these characters become key to the investigation as soon as an old journal written in Latin or an artifact of unknown origin is uncovered. It is clear at this point that the other investigators would have walked into certain death had the library bound researcher not found the passage that states “can only be damaged by fire”.

Choosing your profession is the first step to making your character interesting. The way I make intriguing characters stats here. Pick the profession you would like before rolling your stats. Some keepers may have the stats rolled first so that you can pick a profession that suites your stats. I say no, pick your profession then roll stats, because this can be your first step to creating an interesting character. If you have chosen a boxer for example but have then rolled a low strength or dexterity, we suddenly find our selves with a character who has an interesting flaw. He is a fighter but isn’t that strong and relies on wearing his opponents down, or he is just not that good, his father was a fighter and he wanted to follow in his footsteps but he loses every time he steps in the ring. Suddenly we have some back-story and something identifiable about our character. This can then be redeemed as the character goes on to defeat a horrible creature and save the world. Possibly it will simply come full circle when the character is called upon to use his fighting skills and fails. He died as he lived, fighting, poorly.

Look at each of the stats you have rolled and choose a character trait that goes along with them. Is the character unusually small or large, are they very smart or not so much, have they are very high power indicating that they are firm in their resolve and are not easily shaken. Average statistics can be glossed over but when you see a stat that is above or blow average, tie that into an interesting character trait. A Professor who is not all that sharp and is constantly getting his facts wrong, a grocery clerk who is unusually fleet of foot or an author who packs a punch with her pen and her fists. These are the beginnings of interesting characters indeed, and as a player you should be proud of your strengths and weaknesses because in the end they will make a well-rounded and memorable character.

We then begin to fill in our skills, we have stills that come with our profession and will make sense for the character. Our personal skills, however, is the area we can pull in some additional character traits that will make your investigator interesting. Think about what your character is interested in. It doesn’t have to be anything that is connected with your profession. Choose interests that you might have, does the doctor enjoy sailing or is an pilot, we can put points into navigate an pilot airplane which not only make the character interesting but may come in handy on an investigation. Don’t be afraid to choose art skills like painting or singing as these can come in handy in various situations and at the very least make the character interesting.

Avoid trying to min/max your character, this is Call of Cthulhu and this type of character building makes for less interesting characters. Don’t just pick skills you think you will need but pick ones that your character would have. For example, is the musician really going to have a high First Aid and Medicine skill or did you pick that only because you know it will be useful. Making your character with the intention of winning the game is a serious detriment to making them interesting and believable. There is no winning in Call of Cthulhu there is only horror and insanity, you really need to embrace that and do it in style. Some players are inclined to that and some are not. If you don’t like knowing you will go insane or die and that your character is not going to be around for too long, well my friend, the door is over there, watch out for Deep Ones in the parking lot.

Finally we round the character out with personal details. You probably picked an age earlier since it effects your education among other things. Pick an age that makes sense, don’t just go for a younger character because you want to be spry and sexy. Talk with your Keeper on where your character should be from. Normally it will be no problem however if you are from China and the game is set in Boston it can cause extra game time working your character into the plot instead of time spent playing the scenario.

We finalize the character with back-story. Now, it is tempting to come up with an elaborate back-story for the character, but take a step back, You will be playing this character and gaining back-story as you go, so you don’t need an entire novel to being with. Also make sure you are not stepping on any of the Keepers plot threads with your back-story. Under no circumstance should you have a mythos related back-story. It makes it harder for the Keeper to introduce the sanity shattering horrors of the Mythos when your character is like, “um yeah my professor has seen these things before, see he was attacked as a kid and bla bla bla,” thanks you just made this really cool reveal less impactful for the rest of the players. Have your back story shape your character but not prop them up. For example, you almost drown as a child and so you dislike deep water, not “I was bitten by a radioactive spider and now I climb walls.” Don’t be too elaborate unless you want your Keeper to forget everything you have come up with and never use your back-story in the game. Keepers have enough to think about without worrying about how your Aunt Beth lives in Michigan and makes great pies, which the Keeper should obviously know because it is on page ninety-six of your characters back-story.

In the end make a character that is a believable person with strengths and flaws. You will be playing in a world that is full of the bizarre and fantastic and you will have plenty of chances to add that into your back-story as you play. How a person deals with and reacts to the insane world of Cthulhu Mythos is all part of the fun so try to experience it, not aim to defeat or rise above it. Play your character with flaws, do stuff you think your character would do, slip, fall, run away and scream. I promise you will have a good time and you will create a good time for the other players at your table. Cthulhu Fhtagn.