What the Hell Am I Doing Here

So you have your rulebook, your dice, some pencils and paper and your beverage of choice. You are off on an adventure which you hope will amaze and astound the would-be investigators. They have all selected their favorite professions and have rolled up a group of investigators. Now you can begin to weave your tale of mystery and horror, but wait, what the hell is the farmer doing at the high priced charity ball, and why would the history professor be friends with the career criminal. OK, we have some issues here, you would love just to say, who cares, let's just start playing, but of course, you can't. That might fly with a group of friends just playing in a basement somewhere, but it is much more likely that you are playing at a public game store, a convention, or on some sort of on-line virtual table that is also open to the public. In these cases, the players are going to hold your feet to the coals and ask you, "What the hell am I doing here?"

Here’s the thing, unless you are using pre-generated characters, you are going to have to work out some way to introduce the players to each other and the plot. That is not easy, and it is particularly tricky in Call of Cthulhu. We are talking about a real-world setting here. We can't just say, hey, you head to the tavern, and there is a notice on the wall calling for adventurers. Or the King has invited you all here to help him slay X beast and save Y along the way. I know, those are some pretty crappy setups even for a fantasy RPG, but you get what I'm saying. In Call of Cthulhu, you have a group you expect to put their lives on the line because of what? Because they have an unwavering sense of duty to humanity and uphold justice and good where ever they go? Yeah, I think I'm just going to run home and let the rest of you handle that creepy thing making noise in the basement. Our task as Keepers is two-fold. First, get the band together, man, and keep them together. Second, lead the players towards a solution to a particular problem. Let's look at each of these tasks separately; maybe one can help the other, or at least make it not so difficult.

First, we have to get the characters together. They must have some reason to start speaking to one another, and they need to be together logistically as well. Just putting players in a room together does not a group make; I have tested this theory and found that players will not engage each other without some prompting by the Keeper. It happens, but for the most part, you're going to need some bait to catch these fish. I don't know why, but I am finding players who enjoy running away from the plot. I know people are trying to play their character how they believe they would react in a real situation. That's fine, but please don't expect your Keeper to be so clever at keeping you in the game. If you are running away from the plot, it can be exhausting for a Keeper to have to think up good ways to get you back into the play without creating substantial plot holes or just unrealistic situations in general. It is lovely to role play your character well, but we are playing a game here that does have a plot, so you may want to help build the story and not try to derail it. Let’s break this down into three categories, the place, the reason, and the hook.

First, we need to start with a location that everyone can be together in a way that makes sense. That is very difficult, decided before the game begins. It is best to get a list of the professions you will be dealing with before the game starts so you can make up reasons for each to be at the same place at the same time. I have had situations where people joined games, and I did not know what professions they would be playing, and let me tell you, it is not easy to come up with a reason for the hobo to be at the dinner party within thirty seconds of the game starting. Pre-gens are great for this purpose. If you pre-generate some characters and give them all connections to each other and back-stories that make their presence together will make sense. You have now made it over the first hurdle. I like using pre-gens for one-shots because it eliminates the time spent getting all the characters together and role-playing that interaction. If you only have a few hours to get things done, you don’t want to spend an hour of that time just getting the players to the party. Pre-gens are not always feasible, though, and players love to make their characters. It gives them a deep connection to the world around them and, in that way, a more profound link to the story you are building. It is also great for a Keeper when the players generate their back-stories, which you can draw from to tie them all together. So, now we have some characters, how are we going to connect them and drop them into the same place together?

Let's look at their professions first and see what kind of connections we can make there. If we see two or more characters that have professions that would make sense, we can lump them together as colleagues, friends, or some group working on a specific project. For example, let's say we have a group of six players. Their professions are a lawyer, a boxer, a farmer, a professor of history, a criminal, and a professor of anthropology. Well, we can take the lawyer and the two professors and lump them together somehow. Maybe they are old school chums who get together now and again. Perhaps they are working on a project together dealing with the plot. Or they were put together by the university the professor's work to do something specific. Now we have a group of three together for some reason with varying degrees of obligation to one another. OK, we are getting there, but now comes the hard part, the boxer, farmer, and criminal. It's going to be a long night.

So we can at least tie the criminal to the lawyer in some way. She could show up, looking for some impromptu legal advice, or maybe she is in some trouble and needs the lawyer who helped her last time. Perhaps she's a high-level mobster with a lawyer on the payroll. Or a lackey who is coming to talk to the lawyer for the higher-ups. We have something there which works. We can now put the criminal at the party. The boxer and the farmer are going to be tough, though. We could go the easy route and make them related to some of the other characters, but that's a cop-out, in my opinion. Maybe we need to look deeper into the event or location they will all be meeting. Is it possible that these two are here for an unrelated matter? So, what is the event? In this example, we are at a charity ball so that the farmer could be a wealthy landowner in the area, the wealthy always love to hobnob at these types of events, and the tax break isn't bad either. Or maybe the farmer is there to drop off or pick up something, produce, for example. I like that, it won't be easy, but it makes some sense. Our farmer is dropping off some farm-fresh produce for the kitchen and is wandering around looking for the bathroom. OK now for the boxer. If he is famous, maybe something auctioned off to raise money is an autographed piece of equipment or memorabilia. Or perhaps the fighter is there as a bodyguard for one of the upscale guests. Let's say the boxer had some success, and the autograph on a pair of gloves is what is up for auction. Fantastic, we are all in the same place now, and we all have a legitimate reason for being there. Now we have to make the connections and keep the characters entangled in the plot.

So what can we do to make these characters form a group and begin to work together? If the lawyer and professors are either friends or colleagues, then we have a reason for them to stay together. That is great, but the other three are dangling in the wind. OK, the criminal finds the lawyer and talks with him about some trouble into which she has gotten. These four can now be at a specific location, waiting for something to happen, which pulls them together. Let's say that since the criminal wanted to talk a bit more privately, they have gone onto the vacant balcony to speak. It just so happens our boxer is outside having a cigarette when they all make their way to the balcony. Now we have everyone but the framer in the same spot and isolated. Easy enough, the farmer dropped off his produce and was wandering the place looking for the bathroom when he stumbles onto the balcony. Here we go, we have everyone in a nice secluded place to have them all experience something. Now toss something crazy at them, this experience will bring them together in an instant. They all see a bright ball of fire descend from the sky. Once it gets to the ground, it slows and hovers above the ground. Then smaller objects detach from this thing and begin to move towards the building where the party is. The players witness this all at the same time. Now here is the hard part. We now have to rely on the players to role-play the interaction as they see this.

Some things work well for banding a group together. If they witness something that is exceptionally odd, they end up forming a bond because their story would seem crazy to anyone else. Another good option is to have something traumatic or horrifying to happen to them. If they all witness a murder perpetrated by a Deep One, they suddenly need to rely on each other to prove their innocence. That is a good one because it can even come down to a player seeking out another player because they need to clear their name. You can also add an external element that affects the whole group, requiring them to work together to solve a problem. If you have the investigators all contract the same alien illness, or they all become cursed. They now have to work together to save themselves. The plot of the scenario should guide you here. Sometimes though, players just want to run away, so let them, then, later on, have them begin to face things on their own. That should send them running right back to the group's arms for safety in numbers.

Now we have brought everyone to the place, and we have given them the reason, we just need to get them on the hook. Even if we have the group coming together as a unit and agreeing to pursue some avenue of investigation, we still need to hook them. Once the investigation becomes dangerous, it gets much more difficult to believe that these people would put their lives in danger to solve the mystery. Particular motivations can keep players playing the game. First is money, sometimes it is about a job, private investigators, journalists, authors, and professors are great in this regard. The P.I. needs the money and wants to do an excellent job to get some free word of mouth advertising; it is their job after all. The journalist wants to break the story; it's in their blood. The author has the same desire to tell the story. Professors will sometimes want to study the phenomenon, or discover the secret temple; driven by professional curiosity and fame. If that is not working for your group, how about self-preservation. Stick together and solve this, or that thing is coming to your house at night to eat your head. Maybe you need to lift a curse that will stay with your family forever or a strange illness that is growing spores of Shub-Niggurath inside your organs. No one wants that. Another excellent hook is loyalty or love, put someone they love or are loyal to in danger. It is hard to walk away from something, saying, this is too scary I'm going home when Uncle John is currently in the bad guy's basement slowly being eaten.

It is always good to start your creep factor slow. You don't want people to see something crazy right off the bat and just want to go curl up in the corner. You need to start light, things that a reasonable person would think are odd but not terrifying. Play on the natural curiosity; let them get in there nice and deep, then pull the rug out from under them. It's too late to go back, you're already in the cave that you found in the basement, and you can hear horrible sounds from above and below. Start slow and reveal when the players have been lulled into a false sense of security.

Regardless of all the power you think you can add to your hook, there will be times when the players will simply want to call the cops and go home. That is fine. You should let them do that. Then they can read in the papers the next day how eight police officers lost their lives in a basement on Curwen St. By the way, all of their skin was removed as well. Let them call for help but have the help fail miserably, and the thing, whatever it is, is still coming after them. Yep, if you want something done right, you sometimes have to do it yourself. So now you have them, hook, line, and sinker. They are going to ride this one out to it’s glorious or horrible end, and have a damn good time doing it.

It really shouldn't be so hard to get players to play the game, but sometimes it is. If things don't make a lot of sense, it is harder to get the feel of the atmosphere you are creating. It is best to employ every strategy you can to keep your players involved and engrossed, even if it means having ghouls take old granny prisoner. The one thing we didn't talk about, however, is the concept of the investigative group. These go a long way to making the setup of a game more manageable, you're here because it’s your job. Your with these people because you all work for the same place. Done, go get em. We can talk about that in a future article, so for now, whatever it takes to get those players in there willing or not, they will have a good time regardless of the outcome.