What the Hell Am I Doing Here

So you have your rule book, your dice, some pencils and paper and your beverage of choice. You are off on an adventure which you hope will amaze and astound your 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 to just say, who cares lets 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?”

Heres 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 to the plot. This is not easy and it is particularly difficult 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 called 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 of people who are, at some point, going to be expected 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, then keep them together and progressing towards a solution to the problem. Lets 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 finally 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 does happen now and again but for the most part your gonna need some bait to catch these fish. I don’t know why, but I am also finding players who enjoy running away from the plot for some reason. I know, people are trying to play their character how they believe they would react in a real situation. That is fine but please don’t expect your Keeper to always 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 huge plot holes or just unrealistic situations in general. It is great 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. So let’s break this down into three categories, the place, the reason, the hook.

First we need to start with a location that everyone can be together in a way that makes sense. This is very difficult and must be thought on before the game starts. 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 make sense, you have now made it over the first hurdle. I like using pre-genes 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 house to get this 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 own characters. It gives them a deep connection to the world around them and in that way a deeper connection to the story you are building. It is also great for a Keeper when the players generate their own 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.

Lets 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 either 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 or 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. Maybe they are working on a project together dealing with the plot. Maybe they were put together by the university the professors work at 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. This is gonna 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 advise, or maybe she is in some trouble and found the lawyer who helped her last time. Or maybe she is a high level mobster who keeps the lawyer on the payroll, or even 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.