

Call of Cthulhu is a challenge

Reviewed by David Cook

"Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wagh'nagl fhtagn." ("In his house in R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.")

Well, one would hope so. But with the release of *Call of Cthulhu*, the new role-playing game by Chaosium, Inc., there is no telling where Cthulhu or his hideous minions might appear next.

Call of Cthulhu sells for \$20. However, Chaosium has tried to make it worth the money. The large box contains the Basic Role Playing rules, a 96-page *Call of Cthulhu* rulebook, a 32-page Sourcebook for the 1920's, a folder of character sheets, a large map of the world, a sheet of uncut character and monster pieces, and the dice necessary for play. Even so, there is still space in the box to carry extra papers, a useful Lovecraft paperback or two, and other materials.

Call of Cthulhu is based on the writings of Howard Phillips Lovecraft. Composed during the 20's and 30's and sold to the pulp magazines, these stories were combinations of gothic horror and supernatural fantasy. Appearing or mentioned in many of them were a group of beings or gods created by Lovecraft — Hastur the Unspeakable, Mi-Go, Nyarlathotep, and others. Best known of these was Cthulhu, an octopoid being of great evil and horror. Most of these creatures and gods were fortunately long forgotten or barred from mankind. However, secret knowledge of them did exist — in books, carvings, old ruins, and certain families. Typically, a story would have the main character discovering an evil plot to summon one of these beings or lost lore leading to their discovery. Also typically, the main character would go insane or only barely keep his sanity after defeating the horrible menace, if only for the moment.

The game is based on these ideas and beings, and has to work within these limits. These limits create difficulties that require solutions not found in other games. Therefore, the game is more than just hunting monsters, going on commando raids, or gathering treasures. Characters must research, plan, and try to prepare for the worst.

Sometimes the limits create problems the rules can't solve. Player characters have a tendency to die or go insane rather quickly, making it hard to keep a good character around for long. Also, there is no good way to force the player characters to conform to those types Lovecraft described. Lovecraft's characters seldom carried guns or other weapons — but try to convince a player not to carry a weapon when he knows he's going to face dangerous foes and terrible monsters!

In the game, a player can be either an Investigator (player character) or the Keeper (the judge). Investigators are created by rolling dice for the characteristics of Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence, Constitution, Charisma, Power, Size, and Education. Unique and very important to the game is the characteristic of Sanity. It is not rolled for, but multiplied from Power. Next, the player picks an occupation, either from those in the rules or one the Investigator and Keeper agree on. This occupation defines the skills the player may choose to increase, by adding percentage points to some of the more than 50 different skills. Finally, after calculating money and purchasing items, the Investigator is ready to go. Creating a character can be a long process, but the wide range of choices allows each player to tailor an Investigator to what he or she wants it to be.



The Keeper does the normal work of a gamemaster. He or she reads the rules, creates a scenario, and runs the game, handling all the NPC's and monsters the Investigators meet. The Keeper starts the game by giving mysterious clues, a job, or a strange incident for the Investigators to investigate. From there, they gather more information, visit libraries, talk to locals, and make plans. This may take up the greater part of some adventures. Once they think they know what's going on (and they're usually wrong), they go into action, hoping that whatever they meet won't drive them mad. Here is where Sanity is important. All of the monsters are so terrifying and horrible to the modern mind that the mere sight of one of them can drive a character screaming into the woods. In the game, whenever a character encounters (sees

or reads) something abnormal, the player must make a "sanity roll." Failure can mean temporary or permanent insanity. The rules include a nice, well described list of insanities and phobias.

Preparing all this, though, is a lot of work for the Keeper, and not all of it is easy. There are many rules to read: first, *Basic Role Playing*. Only 16 pages, it will be easily skimmed by experienced players. Unfortunately, although simple, it is not all basic. Important rules are sometimes hard to find, and much is left to the judge's discretion. Next, the Keeper must read the 96-page *Call of Cthulhu* rules. Fortunately, not all the rules must be read before playing. If no monsters or spells are used, the Keeper can skip these sections and read them later.

For the most part, the rules are clearly written, but problems do occur. There is no explanation of "Universal" under Investigator Occupations, allowing a Keeper to think it is an occupation in itself. Usages of the term "permanent insanity" are confusing. The rulebook and character sheets list different base chances for success on some skills. There are several errors in the monster statistics where the listed die roll for a statistic and the average of the die roll do not agree. Only close reading of the text and the use of judgment solve this problem.

There are also nine pages of appendices and a virtually unreadable railroad map, all of limited value. The appendices appear to be notes, random articles, and unfinished designs. Some, made more complete, could be quite useful. Others seem to have no purpose. This space could have been put to much better use by expanding the rule structure; there are no provisions in the rules for such things as universities, consulting specialists, police, or even doctors and hospitals.

Another weakness of the game is the incompleteness of the combat system. There is a small list of weapons (enough different types for the player characters), but there are no rules for how to deal with cover, movement, surprise, or other situations that might affect the accuracy of a shot. Such situations are not even mentioned, and it seems this is at least partly intentional; several times the author indicates that gunplay is not supposed to be the solution to the problems the investigators encounter. But at the same time, the author suggests that most of the Investigators' adversaries will be human. Certainly this will lead to shootouts in many games.

The rulebook does have its strong points. Three ready-to-play scenarios, complete with maps, are provided. These are well planned and can obviously be

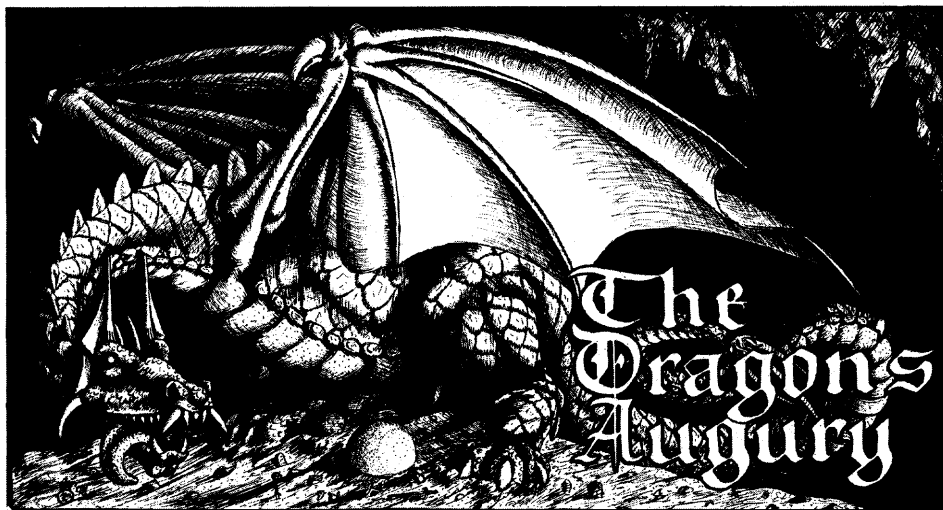
used as a starting point for further adventures, created by the Keeper. The author also wisely avoids random encounters and discourages random die rolls throughout the rules. For this type of game, everything should be prepared in advance. An unplanned event (dictated by the dice) can ruin a perfect adventure. Important information is almost always clearly marked in the text, and there are many examples to explain rules. A complete table of contents is printed on the back cover, a player aid overlooked by many other games.

The Sourcebook of the 1920's is the weakest part of the set. It, like the appendices, appears to be notes and unfinished design work. Some of it — the sketch maps, timelines, biographies, and traditional monsters — is quite useful and fairly complete. Other sections give too little information to be of use. The table for distances between U.S. cities is fine for finding distances between New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco, but is of little use for anywhere else in the country. Finally, there is an entire section giving an alternate character generation system. Inadequately explained as to how this fits into the rest of the rules (or why it is given), it only serves to confuse.

The Sourcebook could have served a better purpose — providing background from Lovecraft's stories. This brings up a major shortcoming in the rules. The author of *Call of Cthulhu* seems to make one assumption throughout — that the Keeper will already know a great deal about the Cthulhu stories. In practice, however, even Keepers familiar with the stories have found it necessary to reread the books, extracting descriptions, place names, and the general feeling of the stories. This problem is made worse by the casual mention in the rules of places or things without adequate explanation. If the Sourcebook contained this information, it would be of greater value.

The most serious flaw in the game is the lack of rules for NPC's. The rules do say, and quite rightly, that Investigators should seldom meet any of the monsters listed. Doing so will often result in Investigator death or insanity, not a pleasant prospect for a player. Therefore, the Investigator will be dealing with and battling NPC's. However, there is nothing given in the rulebook about creating interesting NPC's. There is no quick system for generating NPC characteristics and skills. There are no suggestions for what NPC's will know, how they will be armed, or what (or why!) they are doing. This lack of information puts an extremely large burden on the Keeper and makes it especially hard to create NPC's that will keep the players' interest. There should have been a section devoted to this in the rules.

In the long run, the success of the game will be judged on the accuracy of



the Cthulhu information. And here the author seems to have done very well. The introduction states that *Call of Cthulhu* uses primarily Lovecraft's stories, with other writers' works used only when the author of the rules found them interesting or useful. Certain objectionable post-Lovecraft material has been specifically excluded as not being in the spirit of Lovecraft's work. The information is well researched and generally accurate. Quotes are used in the text to highlight some facts, and the world map includes Cthulhoid places to explore. In this regard, the game stands up well.

It is difficult to either love or hate the game. When played, it's fun. Some players find it challenging to see if they can

remain alive and sane long enough to defeat their foes. Other players actually enjoy trying to go insane. The game has a broad scope for role-playing skills, from quiet researcher to raving madman. For the Keeper, the game is much more trying. The Keeper finds it necessary to fill the gaps in the rules with quick solutions and use lots of creativity and time to create or gather information and ideas for scenarios. It is a good game for experienced role-playing gamers and ambitious judges, especially if they like Lovecraft's type of story. However, those players and judges just getting into role-playing or who have never read a Lovecraft story are well advised to wait on this game until they have more experience.

Hitler's War puts European theater onto a small stage

Reviewed by Tony Watson

My first contact with *HITLER'S WAR* came when Keith Gross, the designer, asked if I would like to work as a playtester during the development of the game. It certainly aroused my curiosity, and I accepted — however, with one caveat: I am a long-time fan of Avalon Hill's *Third Reich*, and since this new game was to cover essentially the material at about the same scale, I doubted I would find it any better than second best behind my favorite. Though I had a strong admiration for Keith Gross's design talents, I felt that *Third Reich* had written the book on how to put WWII grand strategic European warfare into a game format.

In many ways, I was wrong about that. As I saw in playtesting and again in my play of the game after it was published, there are indeed some new angles on approaching WWII in Europe. I still admire the AH effort, but *Hitler's War* is a game I will probably play more often.

Hitler's War is one of Metagaming's

relatively new line of large-format games, number 1 in the Metahistory™ series. The total package marks an important improvement quality for this company's products: The map is printed in three colors, as are the counters, and the latter are now of standard thickness and die-cut. The 24-page rulebook is amply illustrated and remarkably free of glitches, typos and misspellings. The rules text is made more clear by some diagrammed examples of play.

Perhaps the most salient physical limitation of the game is that important charts are found only in the back of the rulebook, which can cause considerable wear and tear on the booklet after a short bout of page-flipping. A pull-out sheet containing all the important charts and tables (either in addition to, or instead of, printing them inside the rules) would have been a better alternative.

Played in the full campaign version with all the advanced rules in use, *Hitler's War* allows either two or three players to manage the entire course of the war in