Call of Cthulhu

CHAOSIUM INC £14.95

Call of Cthulhu is boxed, containing Basic Role-Playing, rulebook, a Source Book for the 1920s that provides invaluable period information, a two colour world map featuring Cthulhoid and real archaelogical sites, six dice, a sheet of character and monster cut-outs and a wad of character sheets. As the title suggests *Call of Cthulhu* was inspired by the works of H P Lovecraft, who wrote gothic fantasy/horror stories in the 1920s and 30s. The Source Book features thumbnail sketches of famous contemporary characters, useful legal guidelines, background information on prohibition and the commercial world, notes on the periods transport capabilities and useful equipment lists. Copious stats for non-cthuloid monsters and other creatures are also provided (I noted that the power stat for skeletons was 3d6 instead of 1) but perhaps its most useful entry is a time line for the opening decades of the 20th century which ensures that the players don't use inventions before they were invented (such as parachutes) and it provides such a comprehensive list of natural disasters and unusual events that at the close of reading one can't help but feel that Cthulhu and his minions might just be out there, plotting to repossess the world. My only criticism of the Source Book is that it is too US orientated and consequently any Keeper (a new name for a Games Master) who wants to set his game in the UK will have a lot of research to do.

As the Source Book seeks to create the atmosphere of Lovecraft's works so the rulebook attempts (and succeeds) to provide a system which enables you to recreate the action and tense excitement of his stories. The rules for *Call of Cthulhu* are, on the whole, comprehensive and clear, easy to assimilate, and modelled on the *RuneQuest* system. Characters are generated through the usual 3d6 rolls, though a new characteristic, Education, important for a character's previous experience (essential to the game), has been added to the list. Pre-

vious experience is worked out through a system of points allocation. First a character picks a profession and then multiplies his EDU by ten and allocates the resulting points amongst the skills listed under his occupation. Then he multiplies his intelligence by five and allocates these points amongst any other skills he might desire. The skills run from jumping and driving to zoology and psycho-analysis and as per Basic Role-Playing you employ these skills through the use of percentile dice.

Sandy Petersen has faithfully reproduced the tone of Lovecraft's works with the *Call of Cthulhu* game system and as a result it is not about hacking and slaying, it is about investigation, which boils down to a rewarding battle of wits between the players and the Keeper.

The game encourages good role-playing from the players. The rules embody a number of deterrents for the would be 'fighter'. Firstly the game is set in a contemporary world and there are set legal and social codes which it is unwise to cross. If a house on a hill where Cthulhu cultists live mysteriously blows up in the night the police have a nasty tendency of turning up and no one is going to sympathise with an investigator who gibbers outlandish excuses about demons. Another problem with fighting on anything but a very small scale is that it's often lethal. There's no armour in *Call of Cthulhu* to protect you against an axe wielding maniac, and that's if your lucky enough to encounter someone who isn't equipped with a modern weapon like a sub-machine gun. If combat involves Cthulhoid monsters or deities your chances of survival, let alone those of victory, tend to be slim. Petersen has created Lovecraft's horrors as realistically as possible and consequently alot of them are very tough indeed. I detected one inexplicable omission though, and that was the absence of the Spawn of Yog-Sothoth but these do appear in the *Gateway Bestiary* for *RuneQuest*. The monsters are not only physi-

cally powerful, they are also mentally potent, for their appearance is so hideous and outrageous that just to see them can damage your sanity.

There is a whole chapter in the rulebook devoted to sanity, which includes a table of types of insanity, from catatonia to paranoia and phobias such as nychtophobia, teratophobia and bacteriaphobia.

Every monster has a sanity loss rating and if you fail to make your sanity roll, which involves rolling less on a d100 than your current sanity rating, you suffer that monsters sanity loss rating. Some monsters are so awful that even if you succeed you still lose sanity. Sanity can also be lost for failing to come to terms with terrible events, such as when your friend is found torn to pieces and the like. Sanity can be increased by defeating monsters or through psycho-analysis but as your knowledge of the Cthulhu mythos increases so the maximum limit your sanity can achieve is reduced.

Call of Cthulhu does contain magic but it takes time to use and generally only involves spells of summoning, binding and dismissal. The games approach to RPing is so novel that it is difficult to design your own scenarios at first, but the rulebook contains a number of very good ready-to-play scenarios and introductions to adventures as well as extensive notes that advise both the Keeper and the players on how to play the game. The reader is told that he needs to become acquainted with Lovecrafts' works before he can catch the full flavour of the game, but, in fact, you can easily use these rules to enter the worlds of Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, and your investigations need not be limited to occult phenomenon.

All in all *Call of Cthulhu* is an excellent game and a welcome addition to the world of role-playing.

Overall: 9   **Ian Bailey**