

Judging the Insane

Writing and running *Call of Cthulhu* tournaments

by Mark Morrison

The concept of a roleplaying tournament is a bit mutant. By their nature, roleplaying games encourage co-operation among players rather than competitiveness. However, the base human drive to be better than the next person leads even roleplayers to joust in the field of mental superiority. More to the point, gaming conventions bring players together with manufacturers, retailers, designers, and (heavens!) each other, so it's fairly natural that they're going to want to play some. Different people play different games, and the most different of all are those that dare play *Call of Cthulhu*; it was inevitable that this nefarious population would go for a tournament after their own hearts (and I mean that most literally). The following essay is a rambling discourse on the writing, running and ruination of *Cthulhu* tournaments, and is drawn from the collected wisdom and experiences of an unholy brethren of Keepers bringing *Cthulhu* to the masses at games conventions in Melbourne, over the past few years. No, don't bother reaching for the atlas, I'll tell ya: Melbourne, Australia. This diatribe comes to you in the hope that it will interest those that have run similar events to hear how it's done in the Southern Hemisphere (or at least in a small corner of it), to illustrate how to tackle it for those who haven't given it a go, and to fill in those ghouls whose tombs are too distanced and lonely to allow social contact.

A few words first on Melbourne gaming conventions. There's not much in the way of games manufacturers in Australia (there are a couple, but this ain't the time or place to go into that), so Melbourne conventions have always been organised with the specific aim of getting together to play, as opposed to the more trade-fair orientation of major U.K. and U.S. cons. Mind you, our cons are much smaller affairs, attracting numbers in the vicinity of 200 - 500 players. Tournaments are offered in different systems, and vary in length and numbers of players: a major tournament spans three sessions, a minor one is romped through in a single session. Depending on the con, sessions are either 2 or 2½ hours duration. Players either enter as full teams, or enter individually and are lumped into same. Each team plays all sessions of an adventure (no godforsaken 'knock-out' abominations here!), and are scored each session for their competence in tackling the module and roleplaying. The first few teams for each tournament are then awarded varying degrees of loot for their efforts. Players generally enter as many tournaments that they can timetable themselves for.

The first *Cthulhu* tournament I ran came as a bit of a surprise - to me, that was. The event was Phantastacon 84, and I had mentioned to the blokes running it that I would run a few demo games of *Cthulhu* if anyone was interested - at that stage I had just discovered the game, and was keen to bring its dank clutch to others, but I didn't expect any great demand. I ambled into the convention at 11 on the first day

with a few notes under my arm, and was greeted with the news that I had three teams ready to play at midday. Hah! Realizing I may be out of my depth, I hastily shanghaied four friends (one had run *Cthulhu* before, two had only played, and for the other it was his first game!), ran them through it, went home, spent all night writing it out in English, photocopied it, flung it at the others next morning, and went back in that day with five brooding Keepers on deck ready to face all comers. It was wildly successful, and we've been doing it ever since.

We have in the tournaments which followed refined our philosophy and technique. *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* remains the main event at all conventions here, and retains a true tournament (win! win! win!) mentality in most cases. *AD&D* teams are of 6 or 8 players, usually shouting over each other. The modules tend to emphasize combat and problem-solving, and in order to make sure everyone gets the same deal all script is prepared to be read at the players, and DMs rarely bend to let the players stray from the module's chosen path, and (because it's a tournament, gang) never help the players if they are floundering. The scoring system measures how far the team gets, with specific points for killing monster X or pulling lever Y. *D&D* tourneys have been getting better in recent years, but the situation by and large remains the same. I always disliked playing under such conditions — flailing away at a difficult module, bogging down with lengthy battles, player arguments, and rarely finishing the adventure because time runs out (sort of like putting a book down seven eighths of the way through — most frustrating). What I particularly detest is the way players and DM are in direct competition to each other, causing stupid rules disputes, etc. So, our methodology in running *Cthulhu* tournaments was shaped in direct opposition to the focus of the *AD&D* ones.

First up, the objective was to have fun. The scenarios had to be as exciting, scary, tension-packed and as entertaining as possible. By basing our scoring on general play style rather than specific achievement, Keepers were freed up to add or embellish scenes as they saw fit, so long as they basically stuck to the scenario for the convenience of those taking part in subsequent session(s)! Time elapsed plays no part in the scoring, so Keepers are able to pace it as they see fit, with only the real restraint of leaving enough time for a break before running their next team. Keeper intervention is encouraged to keep the game moving if the players are bogging down, rather than sitting and waiting for them to come up with a decision. This intervention ranges from the gentle introduction of extra evidence, to adding a conclusion the players may have missed via an *Idea* roll, right down to the large glowing hand which descends from the sky holding a sign saying THIS WAY FOLKS. (Such has been needed on occasion! Actually, my favourite example of outrageous Keeper manipulation was during a playtest, in which to proceed to the next stage it was necessary for each of the players to take a drug. One refused. In desperation the Keeper introduced two nuns who burst into the hotel room, tied her down, administered it, then ran out again. It was surprisingly logical at the time). The fact that the Keeper is working as much as the players to move things forward creates a more relaxed and friendly environment between them, so all can sit back and get on with the roleplaying. A further dictate is that all teams get to the finish of the scenario, so they at least know how it turns out in the end. Our plan is that players enter the *AD&D* to seriously compete, but play *Cthulhu* to have a bloody good time.

Teams have a different Keeper each session, so we get three opinions on each team's performance. I have over a dozen excellent Keepers on tap (some rarely play *Cthulhu* outside of conventions, some haven't even read the rules, but all are excellent roleplayers and gamemasters, which is more important in my book), and we generally manage 15-25 teams. Teams are of 4 players each, being about the maximum number (in my opinion) that you can still get a good scare into people, and the minimum number at which running a tournament for lots of people with only so many Keepers becomes logistically feasible. Teams are identified by name, and many compete time after time. Stalwarts include: SAS; Degenerate Demigods; Penfold Fan Club; SPOD, and the Jack Burton Appreciation Society. My favourite team names: Old Man Whately Had A Farm, Eeeee! Augh! Eeeee! Augh! Eh!; A Thousand Thousand Slimy Things; Legerdemain Vortex; and Dead On Arrival (actually, they're yet to show up, but it's a neat title).

One problem we always face is finding actual space to play at the venue. It's fine to lump a whole heap of screaming *D&D*ers in one loud overheated room with each other, but each *Cthulhu* team needs seclusion, so that a proper atmosphere can be built up, and so they're out of earshot of other players (overhearing something upcoming in a *D&D* adventure gives you a tactical advantage; in *Cthulhu*, it spoils the fun). At cons held on campuses we are able to find separate classrooms, but in hotels it can be trickier. Thus, tournament *Cthulhu* has been played in stairwells, basements, lofts, outside under the spreading dusk, in hotel bathrooms, corridors, store rooms, and stranger places; in truth, an odd environment adds to the atmosphere. Candles were standard equipment until one venue complained about the strange puddles of cooled wax left across the building (fair comment). Anywhere it's dark at a Melbourne con, you're liable to hear screams issuing from it. Most cons goers have learned to cope with this, and it helps the game's mystique no end ("Why are those people in there screaming?").

For scenario setting, we traditionally stick to the 20s, but we have made forays into the 50s, 60s, and early nineteenth century. The writing style tends to be sparse (although, hell, some of us do get carried away with prose), so that the tournament in print is more of an outline while the Keeper supplements with his or her memory of the playtest and own diabolical ideas. As for content, we tend to skirt brand-name Mythos, finding it convenient to invent our own beings when needed. This helps us to throw the players. We're also past masters of the art of vicious twist - players have been led to stop rituals that shouldn't be stopped, perform rituals that shouldn't be performed, they've been deliberately possessed (several times), they've discovered things about their own ancestry they rather they didn't, they've had dreams without knowing it, they've been dragged into dreamlands without wanting to go, they've been framed for crimes they didn't commit, and in some cases they've been deliberately driven mad and killed and then pulled from the illusionary wreckage. In short, we've given them the worst good time we can manage. As noted, Keepers toss in their own ideas as they go, and rarely resist telling the others gleefully of their little modifications and the effects they had, who will in turn deploy them, and by this cross-fertilisation the scenario will grow and evolve so that by the end of the convention it will run slightly differently to the way it started out.

We originally provided the players with set characters with set personalities, and compared their handling of those. However, we have discovered

that they roleplay better across-the-board with characters of their own devising, so we've taken to providing 4 sets of statistics (so that physically everyone is on the same footing). They decide for themselves the character's sex, background, etc. Generally we give each character a set of skills (although often we let them decide for themselves just what their profession is!), with points to divide among these, as well as skills of their own choosing (as per the usual method). Giving the players a small chance to shape the character tends to give them a better kick-off for playing it. Working with the same foundation, their ideas can be amazingly divergent; from a generic Artist framework, different players came up with: Art Historian (x2), Art Collector, Courier, Photojournalist, Conman, Photographer, Scholar/Croupier, Ambassador's Daughter, Artist/Writer, "Art Dealer" (Forger), Painter, National Geographic Photographer, Cartographer, Gambling Hall Owner, Artiste, Priest, Art Critic, Scientist/Inventor, and Journalist. Whew! An extra bonus of this is that the Keepers always sit down to a thoroughly different group, which brings a breath of variety into running the adventure for the nth time 'round.

Wading through this sea of idiosyncratic playing and Keeping to establish an actual winner is surprisingly simple. The scoring system looks at play style rather than specific actions, and is split between Individual Scores (for each player) and Team Scores. The categories for the individuals are *Characterisation* and *Consistency*. *Characterisation* is the player's ability to create and sustain an interesting, believable and logical character. *Consistency* relates to the actual time spent roleplaying — perfect roleplaying is faultlessly talking in the first person as one's character, but some players don't sustain this all the time (or at all). Teams are rated for *Decision Making*, *Genre Success*, and *Keeper Enjoyment*. *Decision Making* is the investigative ability of the team, as to whether they make the right moves and surprise the Keeper with their ingenuity, or need the odd prod (or steady flogging) to keep on the trail. *Genre* is their appreciation for the unwritten laws of horror roleplaying: getting scared, and working with the Keeper to create a spooky atmosphere, rather than hampering the Keeper with his or her creation of mood. *Success* (only applied in the final session) is simply a few bonus points if the players come through — save the world or whatever. *Keeper Enjoyment* is a purely subjective decision as to whether the Keeper had a good time, which is important to us, and indicative of whether or not it was a good game. This is the only area in which a team can score negative, if they were unpleasant to their Keeper (rather than the other way round).

In each case except the latter two, Keepers give their players a letter rating, corresponding as: (A) Excellent, (C) Good, (E) Poor, and (G) Non-existent. (B), (D) and (F) are the mid-ranges for each, if the Keeper feels that they are not quite that good but not quite that bad. Basically, (A) is first rate playing, flawless, constant; (C) is good, but with an occasional lapse, dropping out of character to discuss a problem, tossing in inappropriate jokes, etc.; (E) is generally bad, but with the occasional flash (almost as if the player was thinking, "Hey, time to grab some roleplaying points"); and (G) is just awful, with no input or inspiration.

Someone then takes the sheets and converts the letters to numbers, and tallies them up. The reason for this double-blind is that if Keepers are allowed to play with numbers, they tend to stuff around, giving ½ a point here because this player in the team was better than that one in

another, etc. — the effect is to make a whole lot of personal scoring methods rather than a unified one. Letters are a bit more inflexible (although some go into B++ or D-; just ignore 'em!).

Actual numerical values of each category vary; a rough mix could be 20 in each individual category (so, four players with scores for *Characterisation* and *Consistency* yields 160 points maximum per session), with 80 for *Decision Making*, 40 for *Genre*, 30 for *Keeper Enjoyment* and 30 for *Success* (final session only). This gives 150 points max each session for Team Score, but 480 for the three sessions combined — equivalent to the 480 for the Individual Scores over three sessions. Actual breakdown in each category must be decided, e.g. 20 points could be assigned as A 20, B 15, C 10, D 7½, E 5, F 2½, G 0. This sample range is weighted towards good players, but they deserve to be rewarded. More gradual increments could be deployed. For the odd categories, *Keeper Enjoyment* could be 30 (wow), 15 (good), 0 (okay), -60 (bad), with *Success* as 30 (unqualified success), 15 (success with help), 0 (failure — so much for Tokyo).

Gether them all in, add 'em up, and you have your team placings. I should point out that we don't use exactly the same categories or points values each time, modifying to suit the tournament in question, or if we have a better idea. Some scenarios require new categories specific to them; for our 60s tournament, we split *Genre* into *Genre: Horror* and *Genre: 60s* (saying "Fab!").

If you've hit the players for an entry fee, they're going to expect to see some return in the way of prizes and trophies. We generally reward the top three teams (that's about as much as we can afford). The scoring system also provides a measure of the best individual roleplayers in the competition, if you wish to make a special award. A number of off-beat prizes spark player interest too, and help spread prizes among lower echelon teams. They don't have to be expensive, and in fact the odder the better. One tournament required each player to tell a story, so we awarded a copy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to the best. For our 60s musical tournament, we gave away old L.P.s to the top 15 roleplayers outside of the first 3 teams ("dirty secondhand records for great role-playing"), as well as a book of rock'n'roll dialect to the best presented group (Legerdmain Vortex), and a copy of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* to the most musical (the Innsmouth Coral Society, who gave us such heartwarmers as "Day-O, Day-ay-ay-O ... Dagon come, an' I wanna go home. Come Mr Shaman, summon me a Deep One, Dagon come, an' I wanna go home". Beautiful, eh?).

The way the points and prizes fall doesn't overly concern us though, and hopefully the players feel the same way; they ideally have had their time and money's worth in the mere playing of the thing. The system as it stands does stack the odds in favour of mature teams who know each other. Also, it rewards a specific style of play — but that's the one we promote, and players seem to enjoy it, so we're sticking with it.

That the players do have a good time is stamped on their faces. I have seen them leap back in horror; scream (genuinely); read a ritual in the dark with only five matches to use (they cheated, they lit the box); chant hoarsely twenty times; and look at each other in stunned disbelief. We had one person who played *Cthulhu* for the first time at one of our tournaments, was frightened stupid, and vows never ever to play again. Others come back each year. Perhaps our best example of player absorption: the Keeper was

running for a group of youngish players in a darkened room. The designer of the session stole softly in to listen, and by and by they all forgot he was there. When there was a sudden event, he thought he'd make it dramatic by suddenly stretching out his hands and screaming "Yaarrrrr!". Three of the players leapt out of their skins, but the fourth, on reflex, spun in the chair and landed a right hook that nearly decked the intruder! Now there's pathos.

The actual material remains to be discussed; the means of their destruction. The plots are usually fairly linear, as these are easier to run and take less words to explain. As per usual, clue-following trails link strong scenes of horror — heads flying through restaurant windows, zombies walking backwards in the moonlight, black things sitting on the wings of aircraft, a high chapel full of slowly falling black drapes — that sort of stuff. What is especially liberating about writing for a tournament is that it is a one-off scenario, so you can do whatever you like with the characters in shaping their prior life and future destiny. You needn't stay your hand out of compassion that it's a four years' running character. You can cheerfully put them through the grinder and watch them squirm.

Most of our efforts take three sessions to unfold. We like to have a different writer on each session, which gives each its own unique flavour and challenges. Often each part is set in a different geographical location. We start by thrashing out a basic plot together, divide it up, and meet in a month to playtest through the results. After some continuity editing, we're ready to bring the Keepers in. Our print-runs of the finished result are usually just enough to cover the Keepers and a few interested ghouls; this keeps us free from licensing hassles, and means we don't have to bust a gut to get the thing absolutely perfect presentation-wise.

Following is a summary of the tournaments which our *Cthulhu* collective has hit the masses with, including title, authors, convention, number of sessions, and brief notes on the plot. Phantastacon and Games [Year] are the major Melbourne cons (the latter replaced the former), run at Easter. Arcanacon is the Melbourne University club convention, which has outlasted the club itself, and is my favourite of the two — a bit more laid back and enjoyable. It was traditionally run between second and third term, around September, although now that the uni and school holidays are out of sync it is settling on July. Cauldracon and Pentacon were smaller affairs, in June and January respectively. The former was played at a church hall, and had many excellent and genuinely spooky nooks and crannies. So, in chronological order:

The Crack'd and Crook'd Manse

Morrison, Phantastacon 84, 1 Session

The grand old prototype. The investigators go out to the New England estate of an eccentric explorer who hadn't been seen recently... This one was complete with a storm, an axe-wielding stranger, a withered corpse, and all those other classic trappings. The conclusion brings the house down.

[This scenario was reprinted in *Multiverse 3*, an Australian gaming 'zine].

Plague Dogs

Coleman, Arcanacon II, 2 Sessions

A Dracula-style visitation to a quiet fishing village proves to be something else entirely. Players work against an unseen foe and an unknown

time limit. The first half features the infamous explosive little old lady. Climaxes in something stepping over the horizon which has even Crowley running.

The Bride of Abhoth

Routt, Phantastacon 85, 2 Sessions

The start of Liam Routt's Abhoth cycle. Four women gather together at the invitation of a man they had each had a relationship with at separate times. They arrive at his strange and lonely house on Rhode Island, only to find him indisposed and terror in the air. Creeping horror and insane jealousy ("This is all *your* fault! You never loved him!") in roughly equal screaming portions.

Black as Coal

Coleman, Cauldracon 85, 1 Session

A classic rollercoaster-ride-to-hell sort of scenario, in which the players are hired by a mining company to look into the apparent disappearance of a mineful of workers near Devil's Lake. A claustrophobic dead-hands-clawing-for-the-throat conclusion in the dark is enough to strip nerve ends as the players scramble for the dynamite. [This recently appeared in *Breakout* 27].

The Dark Continent

Coleman, Arcanacon III, 2 Sessions

A plane piloted by the dashing Louisiana Smith is ripped out of the sky over deepest darkest Africa. An unlikely assortment of characters (bearing with them a catatonic priest and a senile prof) have to struggle through the wilds, only to find the salvation of a jungle village worse peril than the bush... native politics, primitive ceremonies, and a finish under a mountain which threatens to come down.

[Printed in *The Devil's Advocate* Vol. 2 No. 1]

Haitian Horror

Routts & Morrison, Phantastacon 86, 2 Sessions

The second Abhoth module. The Schultz Investigation Bureau (Schultz, Schultz, Schultz and Schultz) are hired by one of the original four women to locate a mysterious round stone on Haiti. They do, along with death, zombies, exorcism, voodoo, and some really good rum joints.

Better Dead

Holsworth, Cauldracon 86, 1 Session

McCarthy's 50s, and the investigators are in the military, and assigned as defence counsel for a semi-insane G.I. who has wandered out of a Top Secret base with a corpse in his arms. Down at the base, everyone is permanently out to lunch. Some things are better left unsaid, some books are better left unread, and sometimes it's better to be dead... than red. Proof that even in a Sherman tank you aren't safe from Them.

His Master's Voice

Routts, Cooper & Morrison, Arcanacon IV, 3 Sessions

The swinging 60s, and each team created their own musical group - we had 'em all, folk, acid rock, classical, choral (or coral, as it was), and so on. A gig at the Paris Opera blackens their name and sends them down a long and winding road of madness, depression and possession, and along the way they swap licks with Erik, Erich, the Beatles, some very odd dreamers, and something fairly unspeakable. Set in Paris, London, and the Alps. Gothic and groovy.

Abhoth Omnipotens

Caleo, Routts & Love, Games 87, 3 Sessions

The third and apocalyptically final of the Abhoth series. The Schultzes go to Japan to wrest a plant from the strange tobacco smoking Black Samurai for that crazy lady on Rhode Island. Returning with it, she needs their aid in using it in conjunction with the Haitian stone to drive out a great evil. Unfortunately that evil is still kicking, and after the most surreal escape ever run, they make their way to Venice for an occult festival, wondering how to save the world as the clock draws to midnight and the populace wail in the streets. The rats!

In Memory Yet Green

Morrison, Waters & Anderson², Arcanacon V, 3 Sessions

A happy dinner party sets four strangers on a mad chase for four very striking archaeological artifacts with a lethal track record. Their search takes them to the back of Dunwich and beyond, but once having found the pieces their journey has just begun. They set sail to deal with something they have little idea about, and on the way have the worst Mediterranean crossing on record, as far as bodies on deck and bad craziness go. At Crete they trek to Knossos to their surprising destiny. One of the few tournaments with a truly "happy" ending.

Who Mourns For Adonis?

Holsworth, Pentacon 88, 1 Session

Byron, Shelley, Godwin and Polidori take a picnic to a half-ruined castle on an island on Lake Geneva. Exploring, they find decay, dreams, nightmares and madness. Created before *Gothic* was released, and easily outweirds it. A strange finish as the players find their own end to this odd tale.

Untimely Ripped

Keast, Waters & Anderson³, Games 88, 3 Sessions

A Whirlwind ride of confusion and disaster, spanning three genres of *Call of Cthulhu*, a true sense of wonder and real horror, tinged with perhaps a little sentimentality, and the hopelessness of inevitability ... more I cannot say.

There it is, insubstantial snippets of stuff you'll never play; but the purpose was to give an idea of the range we've covered in the tournament format.

That brings me to the end of this account of the exploits and excesses of a pack of feral Melbournian Keepers. I should point out that although I'm the one scrawling this out, the tournaments themselves were written, run, organised and presented by the whole gang; as per usual, they know who they are. Hopefully this is all of interest or dark inspiration to those who tread the same public path; I would be more than interested in hearing of others' endeavours in the field, my address can be found somewhere in these pages (look for Australian Ghoul or some such subscription details).

Crawl back to your crypts then, and remember to always keep the players in the dark

finish