

CTHULHU LIVES!: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF THE H.P. LOVECRAFT
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

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Outside of the boom in video game studies, the realm of gaming has barely been scratched by academics and rarely been explored in a scholarly fashion. Despite the rich vein of possibilities for study that tabletop and live-action role-playing games present, few scholars have dug deeply. The goal of this study is to start digging. Operating at the crossroads of art and entertainment, theatre and gaming, work and play, it seeks to add the live-action role-playing game, *CTHULHU LIVES*, to the discussion of performance studies. As an introduction, this study seeks to describe exactly what *CTHULHU LIVES* was and has become, and how its existence brought about the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society. Simply as a gaming group which grew into a creative organization that produces artifacts in multiple mediums, the Society is worthy of scholarship. Add its humble beginnings, casual style and non-corporate affiliation, and its recent turn to self-sustainability, and the Society becomes even more interesting. In interviews with the artists behind *CTHULHU LIVES*, and poring through the archives of their gaming experiences, the picture develops of the journey from a small group of friends to an organization with influences and products on an international scale. By studying the game and the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society, one begins to see a unique medium that defies simple classification. Most importantly, this study looks at a performance entity that places “fun” directly at the center of its goals. There is plenty of discussion in general scholarship about performance styles that are political or artistic, or have some grand purpose. What is missing is what is found in this study: a description of *CTHULHU LIVES*, a performance medium that exists for the grandest of purposes, epic fun.

The motto of the HPLHS
and the RHS is *Ludo Fore
Putavimus*: a Latin phrase
meaning “We thought it
would be fun.” And it is.

–Sean Branney & Andrew Leman,

“Who Are We and What is CHULHULVES?”

The Unspeakable Oath 13

To Stephanie,
My partner in gaming, the arts, and life

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the Reverend Horton Heat song, “That’s Showbiz,” the hard-luck narrator turns to the audience and thanks everyone who “spit-shined and polished my way to the top.” I am nowhere near the top of anything, but I must also thank the multitudes of people who expressed interest in and encouragement for this project. It did not matter if it was a note in a book, a pat on the back, or declaring “I have to read it when you’re done,” these little interactions kept me going through the laborious process of creation. Thank you.

To my committee, I give thanks for the directions they led me. The design class of Prof. Bradford Clark drew upon my gaming skills for a more theatrical purpose, and his class on Asian theatre was something I had been missing and wanting since my freshman year of college. Dr. Marilyn Motz’s class was the only Popular Culture class I was able to take, but it was integral to a lot of the ideas in this study. Many of the ideas found throughout these pages were introduced in that class before finding their way here.

Leading the charge, I must thank my advisor, Dr. Jane Barnette. Her level of excitement and rhetorical skills kept me going and kept me hopeful. It has been a pleasure bouncing ideas off her, and then being able to put them in this study as my own. She led me to new ideas, and made sure I didn’t get too caught up in my own thoughts that I would forget to explain how I got from idea to idea. And thank the gods for her MLA skills, because Cthulhu knows I’m lacking in them.

Speaking of the big ol’ Cthulhu, I must proffer humble and lavish thanks upon Sean Branney and Andrew Leman of the H.P. Lovecraft Society. It is their hard work (and play), I’ve just tried to give it the study it deserves. Despite their busy schedules, they gave of their time and resources to answer my questions. As a bonus, I now have two new recipes to satisfy my palette. I also must take the moment to acknowledge Darrell Tutchton, who expressed interest,

though our schedules (primarily mine) didn't provide the opportunity to query about his role in this shared madness.

To my family, I have nothing but profound gratitude. If it were not for their endless support, there is no way I would have ended up even getting into my second semester of grad school. And when I mention my family, I include my beautiful fiancée, Stephanie Ruehl. She accompanied me to the Lovecraft Film Festival, drove me to computer labs when drafts needed printing, and kept me sane and on track. Without her, my failed sanity checks might have derailed this entire process.

Finally, I give a hearty "thank you" to my players, wherever they have ended up. I've had the privilege to play with multiple groups of gamers, and I would not have the passion for gaming (or theatre) if it weren't for the experiences we've had. This study has been the cause for hanging storylines and unfinished games, and I'd like to think it was well worth it. Here's to the next "Night at the Opera."

All right. Enough of this. Though Cthulhu has a talent for waiting, it's unnecessary to dally any further. On with the show.

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1. INTRODUCTION: WELCOME TO THE WORLD

“Now, I’ve never played poker, but if it’s anything like Dungeons & Dragons, I’ll be up to my baldric in +1 scimitars before you can say ‘Cure Light Wounds.’”

–Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, 1/30/06

Since a lot of this academic endeavor is drawn from my activities of the last two decades, the best way to start would be with a few personal recollections. As far back as I can remember, games have been an integral part of my life. It is a rare Bestul family gathering where someone does not break out a pinochle deck or cribbage board. This love of all things ludic has played a constant and important part of my life. Some of my earliest memories are of sitting on parents’ laps while they played cards. When I was old enough to play myself, my fascination with games did not stop with card games. It was in middle school where I first encountered role-playing games, and I have yet to put my dice down.

Right alongside gaming has been my insatiable need to read, to learn, and to research. I was (and still am) a voracious reader; one could probably attribute my near-sightedness to the fact that I read whenever possible, no matter how poorly lit the environment might be. It rarely mattered what the subject was, or if it was fictional or not. Whether it was picking up *The Hobbit* in my sixth grade homeroom, or reading various manuals while accompanying my father as he worked at the Army Reserve base, I just read.

Sometime around the beginning of high school, all the intake turned itself around. It was no longer enough to ingest; I had to create. My fancies turned to writing and performance. As a columnist, editor, short-story writer, or playwright, my pens and pencils became tools I was never without; speech, debate, radio, film, and theatre were the mediums of choice to apply what I wrote. These were all rooted in a desire not only to read or watch stories, but to tell some of my own making. In my games, I became less of a passive participant and more of an active player.

In role-playing games specifically, I wrote countless plots and spent most of the time “running” the game sessions. In college, I would find myself categorized as a scriptwriter; role-playing scripts were where I started.

This project, then, is located at the crossroads where these interests meet. The expression of this meeting place has been percolating since early in my undergraduate experience, when I was introduced to the Invisible Theatre of Augusto Boal.¹ I began to think that these interests might not be completely separate entities, despite the apparent differences between a stage play and a gaming session. I would learn later that I was not the only one making this connection between role-playing games and Boal. In “‘Operation Mallfinger’: Invisible Theatre in Popular Context,” speech and performance scholar Jonathan Gray describes an experiment he and ten other performers executed in a Baton Rouge mall. They attempted to create a unique type of performance using Boal’s tenets, only in a popular culture setting. Gray writes that “the overall response of the actors was one of satisfaction and unexpected pleasure. Several suggested that we should ‘package’ the idea and sell it as a role playing game or other similar commodity” (133). But this statement was not unpackaged during the article; I would need to look elsewhere to find where this style of theatre and role-playing games might intersect.

Enter the subject of this study, a live-action role-playing game that bore the earmarks of theatricality. At its most basic level, the following pages are a story about three artists and gamers, and their creation. Their passion for gaming, the performance and visual arts, research and writing resulted in a ludic entity that is difficult to describe in a mere introduction. Sean Branney, Andrew Leman, and Darrell Tutchton created a game they called *CTHULHU LIVES*. This game and the organization formed to support it, the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society, have

¹ In particular, the ideas that caught my interest were: theatre where the audience are also performers, theatre is public spaces where one would not envision traditional theatre, and (most importantly) the improvisational style of scriptwriting used in Invisible Theatre. The big difference is that a game’s primary goal is rarely social change.

transcended the normal limitations and expectations such an enterprise might normally entail.

That is the basic plot of this study, but the story is something that cannot be told so simply.

Basic, after all, is no fun.

My endeavor is told in the form of an inverted pyramid: broad (general) at the top (beginning), narrow (specific) at the bottom (end). Chapter two starts with a broad description of role-playing games (RPGs), compares it to live-action role-playing games (LARPs), and then offers a glimpse of the gaming industry and community. It is from this broad area that *CHTULHU LIVES* emerged. This entertainment medium has developed its own history, terminology (including a plethora of jargon and acronyms), and debates. Chapter three focuses on the specific influences that informed the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society (HPLHS). The works and milieu of H.P. Lovecraft and his circle of writers kick off the chapter, followed by an examination of the RPG based on Lovecraft's work, Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu*. At the end of the chapter is a brief description of *Cthulhu Live* (no "s"), a commercial LARP that was also borne out of the same area and influences, but developed in a different direction. Finally, the fourth chapter will focus on the specific stories of *CTHULHU LIVES*, the HPLHS, and the specific events (games) that this group created.

Other scholars have analyzed these types of games from a performance standpoint, or a sociological standpoint, or a folklorist standpoint. I think that the story of the HPLHS is best told with minimal analysis, at this early stage. This is a story of how a group of people got together to have fun. Sure, eventually this recreation becomes something more important, but the fun is never lost. The best way to appreciate this is to simply describe. Explain. Tell a few stories.

2. LEARNING THE GAMER'S ALPHABET: RPGs & LARPs

“For many kinds of performance, including gaming, the enhancement of experience Csikszentmihalyi calls ‘flow’ is the goal. Flow is a state of temporary ego-loss that comes from immersion in activity, usually (but not always) activity framed as play... Gamers and non-scholars call this ‘fun,’ and it is not considered optional or secondary when one participates in a role-playing game.”

*—Jack Holcomb, *Playing Popular Culture: A Folkloristic Perspective on Role-Playing Games and Gamers**

It may be a matter of semantics, but a little crowbar separation is the first step to getting at the heart of gaming for recreation. To this end, I need to define what I mean with the acronym “RPG,” as opposed to the more generic term of “role-playing.” The idea of games where players take on roles is hardly limited to the young gaming culture; nor is it a new topic for research. Theatre rehearsals and workshops use role-playing games, as do classrooms ranging from elementary to college level. Whether it is having performers engage in improvisational games while taking on a specific role, or using classroom time to recreate the trial of Socrates with students, these games can be found in any number of texts. One example is Marc Carnes’s “Reacting to the Past” series of games. In them, students take on the roles of historical personas in a specific time period. Proclaiming that “role-playing games have long been a staple of higher education” (B7), Carnes describes classroom activities with a specific purpose to teach the application of skills learned in a textbook. In any similar cases, though students might describe it as fun, such fun would be considered secondary to other end-results. The aforementioned types of games have purposes besides fun and leisure. They endeavor to improve performance skills, open up participants creatively, or educate about history or politics. The games that I am focusing on, RPGs, exist for the sole purpose of leisure. The ultimate question for them is

whether or not they are fun to play (unless they are also commercial products, of course; then they must also be profitable).¹

The History of a Medium and an Industry

Of these RPGs, the archetype and best-known game is the medium's original, *Dungeons & Dragons*. First released in 1974, *D&D* (as it is often known) has been the industry standard for what it means to be an RPG. But this new entertainment medium did not appear overnight, or without precedent. Sociologist Gary Alan Fine traces the ancestors of RPGs all the way back to the "first" war games, chess and *wei-ch'i* (also known as "Go" in America). Both were meant as leisure activities that mimicked war. "Although the original form of these war games is not known, their current form is a pale simulation of battle strategy" (Fine 8). But many games could cite these two as precedents. Both Fine and performance scholar Daniel Mackay mark the true beginning of RPGs with an 1811 game known as *Kriegspiel*. Created by Herr von Reisewitz, the game was a simulation meant to train Prussian officers:

This first war game, *Kriegspiel*, simulated miniature battle terrain.

In this game, opposing players strategically arranged counters—representing various troop formations—while an impartial umpire determined the outcome of mock battles with a system of rules. Random dice rolls simulated the chance factor associated with battlefield encounters. (Mackay 13)

The next big war game both authors mention is H.G. Wells's *Little Wars*, similar to *Kriegspiel* except for two factors: it was intended for recreation, not training, and Wells recommended using

¹ The reality of RPGs in the U.S. is that most of them are developed commercially. Though many gamers create their own RPGs, it is rare for these homemade games to grow to the point where they would have published materials, publicly-accessible archives, or a presence and influence beyond their local community. If a group reaches this level, someone will usually want to package their creation in a commercially-viable form.

miniature figures to represent troops instead of counters. Building on the structure of *Little Wars*, gaming companies such as Avalon Hill would eventually begin marketing commercial war games. The hobby would eventually evolve in two parallel game types: “some simulate history through miniature battles, while others simulate history through board games” (Fine 9). But the hobby would also mutate and evolve into what we now know as RPGs. The transition from war games, board- and miniature-based, is usually credited to Dave Wesely. A Minneapolis-St. Paul war gamer, Wesely was interested in games where one person winning did not necessitate another losing. Starting in 1968, “Wesely ran war games in which the players were not necessarily posed against one another on a miniature battlefield” (Mackay 14). Though he counted the games a failure, one of Wesely’s players, David Arneson, saw potential. He began introducing elements of fantasy literature (such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*) and reduced the combat from army-level battles to individual character skirmishes. After a few years, Arneson teamed up with Gary Gygax, a war gamer who had authored *Chainmail*, a medieval war game system. “They worked together, play-testing and devising rules for two years, and in January 1974 the world’s first role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons*, was published” (Mackay 15). Arneson and Gygax’s company, TSR,² would become one of the big names in what would become the gaming industry.

The game these two men created did more than create a new medium; it precipitated a new industry. The format Arneson and Gygax came up with soon spawned other RPGs, and gaming became more than a subset of the hobby industry; it was its own entity. Within a decade, *D&D* accidentally inspired a new type of game: the *fantasy* war game. *Chainmail* had been an experiment in reducing war games to the level of individual combat. After *D&D* achieved

² Though TSR originally stood for “Tactical Strategy Rules,” this is piece of trivia is rarely referenced. This is due to the company renaming itself TSR, and because it was bought by gaming giant Wizards of the Coast in 1997, which was bought by Hasbro, Inc., two years later.

success in the late '70s, *Chainmail* was still published, though as more a means of using *D&D* miniatures to keep track of the logistics of their characters in combat. Then, in 1983, the Games Workshop company published an innocuous article about *Warhammer* in its magazine. “[T]he first article on the system was published in *White Dwarf* 45. Originally conceived as a something exciting to do with your RPG miniatures, the game was never designed to be the elaborate power house of fun that it is today. No one had any idea how big it would become” (*White Dwarf* 107). What Games Workshop had done was take the RPG formula and re-apply it to historical war gaming. The result was an army-level war game that took place in a fictional setting. And the company soon became a force to rival TSR in the gaming industry. But this would not be the only gaming innovation directly evolving from *D&D*. In 1991, mathematician Richard Garfield pitched an idea for a new board game to a small company called Wizards of the Coast. Instead, the company asked him to come up with something that would draw the RPG crowd, but be more portable and take less time.³ In 1993, they revealed *Magic: the Gathering*, a game played with a random assortment of collectible cards. What Garfield had done was apply the RPG formula to card games (not a new concept), but added the concept of trading cards. Within a year, Wizards had created a new category of game: the collectible card game (CCG), marrying “the strengths of gaming and trading card traditions” (Garfield 3). This CCG spawned a market bigger than any of its predecessors had; countless CCGs followed in *Magic*’s wake, many based on pre-existing RPGs or war games. Over the next few years, Wizards of the Coast went from a small company to the biggest conglomerate in the gaming industry.

These game formats, combined with board games, make up the gaming industry. (Video and computer games used to be lumped into it as well, until their recent financial viability has

³ RPGs often require books, notes, dice, pencils, a room, and at least a few dedicated hours. What Wizards came up with was a game with similar elements, but only needed a sixty-card deck, a table, and about twenty minutes to play.

made them their own industry.) This industry has its own periodicals (such as *Dragon* and *InQuest Gamer*), international conventions (including GenCon, Origins, and the Essen Game Fair), and industry awards (such as the Origins Awards,⁴ the Oscars of gaming in North America). While the focus of this study is on a non-commercial live-action role-playing game, it would not have come about or reached its current level if it were not for mass-market RPGs and the gaming industry.

The Poetics of an RPG

Possibly as a result of being commercial entities (usually), there are certain common elements that can be found in most RPGs. In a general sense, Fine describes them as “a hybrid of war games, educational simulation games, and *folie à deux*” (6). By *folie à deux*, Fine means a shared illusion, a collective fantasy.⁵ Mackay defines it in a more technical fashion. He views an RPG as:

an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters*’ spontaneous interactions are resolved. These performed interactions between the players’ and the gamemaster’s characters take place during individual *sessions* that, together, form *episodes* or adventures in the lives of the fictional characters. (4-5)

⁴ The force behind these awards is the Game Manufacturer’s Association (GAMA). A GAMA committee, the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design, is responsible for reviewing the previous year’s releases and voting on nominees and winners. The nominees are announced at GAMA’s trade show, a convention in March for manufacturers and retailers. The winners are announced in that July of that at GAMA’s public convention, Origins. Besides creative accolades, winning an Origins Award gives a game large, positive exposure.

⁵ Fine explains that he is referencing a psychological disorder: “In *folie à deux* individuals share a delusional system” (12). He shifts the implication from “shared madness” to *Shared Fantasy*, the title of his book.

The reason for the italicized words is that they are common terms in the RPG community, the jargon that one must understand if one wants to study RPGs. I will break down these games in terms of participants, rule systems, and fictive backgrounds.

The most important element in these games is the participants. The participants can be divided into two categories: the gamemaster (GM) and players. “The gamemaster is akin to a play’s director, a novel’s author, a film’s editor, a legend’s storyteller, a performance’s actor, and a sporting event’s referee” (Mackay 6). GM is a neutral term for this participant, as different games will call him or her by different names (i.e., DungeonMaster, Storyteller, Keeper, referee). Whatever the name, the GMs position is simple: he or she is in charge.

The referee is in theory omnipotent... For this reason players refer to the referee as God... Others describe the referee as a storyteller or playwright. Each of these metaphors recognizes the position of the referee in structuring the action of the game. He chooses how the game will be constructed, both in terms of the setting and the scenario. In theory he is the dreamer; he is in control. (Fine 72-3)

Assuming the participants already have chosen the specific RPG to play, the GM’s initial job is to secure a story. This entails either writing a script, or familiarizing himself with a pre-written one. No matter which path is chosen, a GM must be extremely familiar with the script, so as to be able to improvise when necessary without contradicting the continuity of the story. Once a story is in hand, the GM must flesh out the non-player characters, or NPCs. These are the individuals that the players’ characters will interact with during the course of the game. The NPCs are almost always portrayed by the GM. Finally, the GM is in charge of running the game. This means that he or she not only runs the individual game sessions (like a director might run

rehearsal), but the GM also “performs the role of continuity editor. If he does not create his own fictional setting and instead chooses to set his role-playing narrative within an imaginary-entertainment environment, then it will be his responsibility to determine what products are part of his world’s canon and which products are not” (Mackay 30). If a group of characters plays in more than one game, it is the responsibility of the GM to take notes and direct what happens to lead up to the next game. Such notes usually take the form of short memoirs of character actions, important scenes, possible future plots, and moments that the GM thinks will be of use in other games. These notes give the GM means to flesh out characters and storylines in future games.

The other type of participant in an RPG is the player. Each player is responsible for portraying a character during a game session. Often, this character has been created by the player, though some game scripts will call for players to portray previously-created characters. In either case, a player’s character is represented by a character sheet. Character sheets are often no more than a couple pages in length, and translate the imaginary character into an entity that can function in a game’s system. Appendix A is a blank character sheet from the current version of the RPG archetype, *D&D*. When a player has filled in the blanks, this sheet becomes the skeleton that participants flesh out with their imaginations. Folklorist Jack Holcomb terms this part of the RPG system as character description. “Character description rules (often called character generation rules by gamers) attempt to quantitatively codify a character’s aptitudes, strengths, and weaknesses” (31). He mentions three types of descriptors: character attributes, skill sets (or professions), and tallies. The first descriptor, a character’s attributes, are “qualities that every character possesses to greater or lesser degree, and they are usually regarded as the quantified core of the character” (Holcomb 31). These are often numerical means of describing how a character compares to others in terms of physical and intellectual (and sometimes social) build;

rarely do these values change over a character's life. All *D&D* characters have the same six attributes, with numerical scores that affect how said character interacts with the game's system (see fig. 1).⁶

Besides attributes, a character is also described on the basis of what he is capable of doing, what he is skilled at. Holcomb divides these into either skills or professions.

When a player is creating her character, a game might give her a list of professions (also known as job classes) to choose from. Whichever she chooses, she gets a pre-determined set of abilities that come along with the job. Or, an RPG might offer a certain amount of points that the player can use to buy various skills at various levels of proficiency. More often than not, a game will combine these systems (the player chooses a profession, which allows the player to buy from a list of possible skills). In *D&D*, a player chooses a job class, which gives her the ability to increase a skill above what her character's attributes have set them (see fig. 2). "Whether a game has a profession- or skill-based system or some fusion of the two, this part of the

ABILITY NAME	ABILITY SCORE	ABILITY MODIFIER	TEMPORARY SCORE	TEMPORARY MODIFIER
STR STRENGTH				
DEX DEXTERITY				
CON CONSTITUTION				
INT INTELLIGENCE				
WIS WISDOM				
CHA CHARISMA				

Fig. 1. Character abilities (attributes), from Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, and Skip Williams, *Dungeons & Dragons: Player's Handbook* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast 2003).

CLASS		SKILLS		MAX RANKS (CLASS/CROSS-CLASS)	
SKILL NAME	KEY ABILITY	SKILL MODIFIER	ABILITY MODIFIER	RANKS	MISC. MODIFIER
<input type="checkbox"/> APPRAISE ■	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> BALANCE ■	DEX*			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> BLUFF ■	CHA			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> CLIMB ■	STR*			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> CONCENTRATION ■	CON			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> CRAFT ■ ()	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> CRAFT ■ ()	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> CRAFT ■ ()	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> DECIPHER SCRIPT	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> DIPLOMACY ■	CHA			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> DISABLE DEVICE	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> DISGUISE ■	CHA			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> ESCAPE ARTIST ■	DEX*			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> FORGERY ■	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> GATHER INFORMATION ■	CHA			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> HANDLE ANIMAL	CHA			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> HEAL ■	WIS			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> HIDE ■	DEX*			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> INTIMIDATE ■	CHA			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> JUMP ■	STR*			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> LISTEN ■	WIS			=	+ + +
<input type="checkbox"/> MOVE SILENTLY ■	DEX*			=	+ + +

Fig. 2. Character skills, from Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, and Skip Williams, *Dungeons & Dragons: Player's Handbook* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast 2003).

⁶ It might seem strange to represent abstract human attributes numerically, but closer examination reveals that such a practice is not uncommon. We measure a person's constitution with weight, blood pressure, or body fat percentage. In sports, athletes' dexterity is measured by their times in a shuttle run. Though there is argument on their validity, we still measure people's intelligence with IQ tests and GRE scores.

character description rules describes the abilities that are understood to be trainable and learnable over time as the character gains experience” (Holcomb 32-3). These improvable skills give a player a secondary motivation in each game session. Not only does she want to create a story, but she also can better her character.

The third type of description that Holcomb outlines is the tally: “this is a simple tallying to represent some significant part of the character, such as how much experience she has accrued, how many wounds she has taken, or how much luck/good karma she has coming to her. These sorts of tallies often fluctuate over the course of a single game, and they can usually go up or down (33). Over the course of a game session, then, a character will not remain static. Tallies are means of keeping track of how the character is being altered during the course of the session. Whereas skills primarily change in between sessions, tallied components are immediate. One of the most common types of tally is “hit points,” where a *D&D* player would keep track of her character’s physical well-being (see fig. 3).⁷

	TOTAL	WOUNDS/CURRENT HP	NONLETHAL DAMAGE
HP HIT POINTS	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Fig. 3. Hit points, from Jonathan Tweet, Monte Cook, and Skip Williams, *Dungeons & Dragons: Player’s Handbook* (Renton, WA: Wizards of the Coast 2003).

Of course, much of this talk on character description assumes that characters will be around for more than one game session. Usually, the only reason a character would be used just once is if he is part of a one-shot, or standalone, game session, such as are often played at conventions.

[T]he convention role-playing game session differs from the ongoing role-playing game narrative in that the convention experience depends more on the structural activity of the role-

⁷ In the same manner as attributes and skills, things such as injuries are measured by numbers. These quantities are designed relatively; if falling off a horse is rarely fatal, its numerical damage should average less than a normal character’s hit points.

playing game text to bring together a group of like-minded players.

The game system consequently becomes the most distinguishing shared substance among a group of people who may have never met each other before. (Mackay 100)

Most of the time, however, there is a continuity between game sessions, allowing for the possibility of a rich narrative experience. As the over-arching narrative progresses, characters often become more proficient and capable due to their journeys. Since a player's character exists within a quantitative system, it would be difficult if the only exhibition of a character's growth was based on his player's performances from session to session. Instead, many RPGs also incorporate "experience points" as a means of displaying a character's growth. Such points can be granted whenever the GM deems it: for defeating opponents, helping NPCs, fulfilling obligations, or cleverly orchestrating a coup to overthrow the regional Prince, for example. Though games are usually very explicit on how a GM should award these points, the system is open to abuse:

[H]ow the characters perform in relation to the story (with the plot twists, villains, and so forth), which most gamemasters script out before the session, will determine the rewards that the gamemaster distributes to the characters. The pattern is the same one that Foucault observed in other techniques of disciplining the subject. It's just that in the role-playing game performance, the gamemaster is empowered to mete out punishment and rewards to the players' characters. The player feels the sting of correction or the

excitement of reward mimetically, for they are the proxy of their character. (Mackay 94)

Despite Mackay's misgivings and his references to Foucault or Bakhtin, such description of the empowered GM is a slight exaggeration. Whereas disciplined prisoners do not have the option to leave, players can easily choose not to play an RPG. Instead, similar to a Hegelian master/servant dialectic, the GM is dependent upon having players; without them, he has no story. In an RPG, "the story is truly created interactionally, guided but not determined by the GM. (In fact, a GM who forces the action in a particular direction over his players is considered heavy-handed and not much fun to play with. GMs who undercontrol may annoy some players, but are generally better tolerated than those who overcontrol)" (Holcomb 10). Because an RPG is a game, it is meant to be interactive fun. When a heavy-handed GM runs a game that is not fun, he will likely find that his player group quickly disappears.

Rewarding experience points is usually considered part of a game's "system." In RPGs, system refers to how a game's rules resolve events that occur in a session's narrative whose outcomes might be in doubt:

Event resolution happens when the characters act or when they are acted upon; usually, the event in question has to be something momentous or challenging. For instance, the event resolution system of a game would not be invoked when a character tries to start his car, unless special circumstances entered the picture. If he tries to start the car without a key, or if he tries to start a car when he has never seen one before, or if he is starting his car and has a chance to notice the bomb wired to the ignition before he turns the

key, then the event resolution system might come into play.

(Holcomb 33)

Not all scholars have the same reaction to systems. Mackay, who favors the aesthetic and narrative possibilities of RPGs, regards a game's rule system as a vestige of its war game predecessors. Holcomb, on the other hand, points out that a game's system is "often a selling point for a new game, and event resolution is often regarded as the heart of a rules set. The event resolution system of a game greatly contributes to the game's feel in play" (34). Much like director or actor or designers have different choices in their methodology, GMs and players and game designers have different rule systems at their disposal. For example, *D&D* uses the d20 System, named for its use of a 20-sided die to determine most outcomes. Chaosium's games use the Basic Role-Playing System (BRP), a simpler design that uses percentage rolls to determine outcomes. White Wolf games use the Storyteller system, a flexible system that utilizes a pool of 10-sided dice. Though dice are the most common means of event resolution, there is a very small minority that uses other means.

If the system is a game's structure and methodology, then the game's setting is its content and style. RPGs can (and have) transfer from system to system, or have their systems updated and revised. But the fictive background, the world of an RPG, is not quite as mutable. "RPG settings are often designed independently of rules, but rules are hardly ever designed independent of any setting" (Holcomb 114). Though a system can be a game's selling point, the quality and longevity of an RPG primarily depends on the narrative backdrop in which the characters exist. Mackay refers to these backdrops as "*imaginary-entertainment environments*:"

fictional settings that change over time as if they were real places
and that are published in a variety of mediums... each of them in

communication with the others as they contribute toward the growth, history, and status of the setting. Because they appear in so many mediums, imaginary-entertainment environments are always collaborative. In fact, often a brand name becomes more important than the author, director, or game designer of the latest manifestation of that milieu. (Mackay 29)

The imaginary-entertainment environment rests upon two assumptions: that an RPG's background is drawn from pre-existing fictional backgrounds (such as a game that takes place in the *Star Wars* galaxies), or that the RPG's background does well enough to create a world that will be carried over into other mediums.⁸ But in the limited experience I have encountered where the GMs create their own backgrounds, a sense of a sprawling setting carries over into their amateur fiction, gaming conversations, or new versions of background they create for later games.

All of these elements, the participants and the system and the fictive background, are combined into an RPG, often in a book format available at the local bookstore or game shop. But RPG the product is different from RPG the event. Much like the script of *Hamlet* is not the same as the Royal Shakespeare Company's (or anyone else's) stage production of *Hamlet*, an RPG session is different from the product that you can buy at a store or create on your own. The anatomy of a game session can be seen as the intersection of a session's script (prepared in advance), the interactive storytelling that occurs during the session, the "flickering" or "keying" process participants engage in, and the meta-game aspect that is present in every session.

⁸ For example, *D&D* had a cartoon in the '80s, a film in 2000, and multiple lines of novels. White Wolf's *Vampire: the Masquerade* was turned into a short-lived TV series, produced by Aaron Spelling.

And RPG scripting is a tricky thing. No matter how much depth and artistry and plot a writer puts into it, he cannot predict the direction the players will take it. If *Hamlet* were an RPG script, Shakespeare could plot it so that Hamlet sees Claudius praying and defenseless; he would be powerless, however, over whether Hamlet would stand there and soliloquize or actually kill his uncle. That decision would be completely under the control of the player portraying Hamlet. A short summary might be that an RPG's script is "written" during the session, then the GM's plot runs squarely into the player-characters' choices and goals. A more comparative description might run:

The role-playing game's script includes not only the drama—the game system and the fantasy world—but also encompasses the contributions of individual players to the narrative. Whereas the script in Schechner's model is either a 'plan for a traditional event' or a plan developed during rehearsals specific to a theatrical production, the role-playing game's script is the sum of the gamemaster's preparations for each episode coupled with the players' hopes, plans, concerns, and ambitions for their characters.

(Mackay 51)

This does not mean that a GM can haphazardly throw together some ideas and run a session (well, he can, but it rarely will turn out to be enjoyable). For starters, it is the GM's responsibility to come up with a scenario's hook, its "rationale for why the [characters] have banded together, as well as explaining why they have certain resources at their disposal... and how new [characters] can be readily introduced to the campaign" (Tynes *Delta* 4). Once the GM has this figured out, a plot must be laid out: an objective or three present themselves for the players to

achieve. A game will last until the characters are incapacitated or are successful (or not). A simple script is one that is little more than connecting plot point A to plot point B, all the way until they achieve G. Often, veteran players will prefer something more complex, something that plays upon the aspirations and backgrounds of their characters. Finding a balance of what to script ahead of time is tricky: “A referee should not construct too complete a scenario—one that gives the player their total motivation and eliminates individual action: ‘The question is how much of a good scenario can you plan in advance, and how much has to happen along the way...’” (Fine 80). Besides the actual plot, a GM has to consider the logistics of a scenario: How long will it take? Some scenarios require multiple sessions; even a single session can vary in length from a couple hours to an all-day event. Another consideration is whether a story will be a scenario or an orchestrated campaign. A campaign is a series of linked scenarios that builds to an overarching climax. Each scenario in a campaign has objectives that will often bring the characters closer to achieving the super-objective of the campaign. If defeating the galactic Empire was the super-objective of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, then blowing up Death Stars and rescuing Han Solo would be akin to individual scenario objectives.

So far I have only covered the preparation work that goes into an RPG session. But the process of interactive storytelling is what works to complete the final narrative. At its most technical level, Holcomb describes this process as creating an “interactional rhythm”:

The GM will describe an environment, situation, or character at some length; the players will question the GM for additional details and the GM will respond (this step can be repeated several times); then the players describe their actions, and the cycle starts over as the GM describes the consequences. This is the

fundamental rhythm of RPGs, a give-and-take between players and GM” (10).

This back-and-forth takes place in two different timelines. Much like a film or a play, the performance can take place in the span of two hours, though the story might span a day, week, or years. RPGs engage in a similar interplay of time. There is real time (the hours that participants engage in a game session) and there is game time (the passage of time that characters experience during a story). “Game time is fictional: it has nothing to do with real time. Game time is also variable. It passes at whatever rate the [GM] says. [GMs] routinely expand and contract time as well as space, in order to maintain a lively narrative” (Petersen and Willis 52). In this manner, the GM acts like the film editor that Mackay compares her to.

Structurally, this back-and-forth and timeline manipulation describes the idea of interactive storytelling, but it does not adequately describe the performance event that an RPG session is. “The format of a non-LARP tabletop⁹ RPG might be described as a dramatic event by calling it improvisational readers’ theater, wherein the readers verbally deliver not only their lines but their stage directions as well, and in which they are also the audience” (Holcomb 5). To describe the performance aspect of an RPG scenario, most scholars have used derivations of Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*.¹⁰ Mackay also mixes in his readings of performance scholar Richard Schechner to inform what he sees as the five frames in process of a game session:

1. the social frame inhabited by the *person*;
2. the game frame inhabited by the *player*;
3. the narrative frame inhabited by the *raconteur*;
4. the constative frame inhabited by the *addresser*;

⁹ Often, the adjective “tabletop” is used to further distinguish pencil-and-paper RPGs from their live-action brethren.

¹⁰ *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (London: Harper & Row, 1974).

5. the performative frame inhabited by the *character*. (56)

Applying this to Holcomb's description of a game session being like improvisational readers' theatre is a quick way to understand these frames. The social frame (person) would encompass the small talk that the readers might engage in that has to do with the world outside the performance ("did you get that job?"). The game frame (player) would be the conversation that happens inside the performance world, but outside the performance ("what page are we on?"). The final three frames all constitute the performance: the narrative frame (raconteur) is occupied whenever a reader takes the role of a narrator; the constative frame (addresser) is the reading of stage directions; the performative frame (character) is when a reader is speaking her actual lines. Scholars use Goffman's term for the movement between these frames: "keying," while Mackay thinks that the traditional definition of frames has borders that are too "rigid, rational, (and) well-defined." He prefers to think of these frames as porous spheres that players kinetically and unconsciously jump back and forth through: "Fine, in fact, identifies a continuous flickering between the game, narrative, constative, performative, and idiocultural (or social) frames in the role-playing game performance... Players easily shift between frames" (64). Mackay and many other scholars find this process intriguing; actors key through different frames during the course of a stage performance, but it is rare that they might flicker between multiple frames within the same sentence. The participants in an RPG session do this on a regular basis. Such performance requires participants to create a means of letting others know when they are "in-character" or "out-of-character," even though such distinctions are sometimes not clear.

Despite all the interest, these scholars rarely go in-depth when discussing the metagaming that goes on during a session. In RPG circles, the verb "metagame" is often a loaded word. At its most basic, a player engages in metagaming when the real world intrudes and informs his

character's actions in the game world. Though he was describing live-action game sessions, cultural anthropologist Brian Myhre's categories of metagaming are applicable to tabletop RPGs, as well:

With *player narration*, players planned future scenes for their characters... *Confused actions* occurred when a player confused in- and out-of-game sources of information... With *self-directed improper story involvement*, players became involved in scenes they observed out-of-character, or used out-of-game knowledge to become involved where their characters had no in-game likelihood of being involved... *Collusion* between players existed when two or more characters agreed on in-game actions, despite how uncharacteristic those actions may have been... The fifth form of metagaming was the assumption that certain players consciously *power-game*. (109-10)

Though Myhre posits that everybody metagames, it is often used as a pejorative by RPG gamers. If Mackay compares GMing to discipline of prisoners, then heavy metagaming is akin to the patients trying to run the asylum. These techniques are regular occurrences; but when they become the norm in a session, the players have disrupted the interactive storytelling so as to write the script that they want. The first four types of metagaming Myhre describes are plain enough, but power-gamers need a little elaboration. A power-gamer is someone who uses the structure and rules of a game to make his character as powerful as possible. This player would figure out what the most important skills are and make his character as proficient as possible in them. He would find ways to "break" the game's system. He would do everything possible to

make his character the most powerful, meaning that all games the character is involved in must take him into account. Rather than playing an RPG to engage in interactive storytelling, he does it to “win” in a medium which has no concrete means of winning.

Terms such as “power gamer” and “metagaming” are example of jargon, or metacommentary. “No society is without some mode of metacommentary—Geertz’s illuminating phrase for a ‘story a group tells about itself’” (Turner 104). That gamers have formed a large and well-connected community should come as little surprise. Despite the stereotypical image of gamers as loners, the basic structure of an RPG counteracts this: “Role-playing is a social activity; it is impossible to do it alone” (Holcomb 70). From the earliest days of the medium, there have been societies and publications and conventions that existed for the sole purpose of supporting the community and the industry. Publications could range from small ‘zines to international publications. Organizations were often small and ad hoc, though some game companies realized that it was usually beneficial to have a company-created organization for serious players of their games. With the explosion of the Internet, this community has become even easier to enter. Company and fan forum sites provide opportunities for participants to collaborate, share plots, ask for help, and find helpful directions for game play and script research. Publications have embraced online counterparts, some gamers offer podcasts that resemble talk radio, and companies have an easier time reaching their dedicated players. In fact, White Wolf’s in-house gaming organization, The Camarilla, is one of the reasons the company is at the foreground of a different type of RPG: the live-action role-playing game, or LARP.

Taking it Outside: LARPs

Whereas RPGs have a relatively easy-to-document history, LARPs have a lot of conjecture. The theories for this are many and speculative at best, but the difficulty to package

and sell a LARP is certainly a contributing factor. It is much harder to pin down when something started if there is not much written down and dated. One of the first precedents gamers will often point to is the Society for Creative Anachronism, an organization that blends historical re-creation with role-play and recreation:

The Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) is a not-for-profit educational organization devoted to the study of pre-seventeenth century Western Culture. It concentrates on the European Middle Ages, Renaissance, and members work to recreate the arts and skills of this era. Some members study the Middle East and explore the interaction between Europe and Asia during the period under study. The SCA was incorporated in 1968, but recognizes a tournament held in Berkeley, California, on May 1, 1966, as its founding date. (SCA 2)

The level of role-play varies from person to person, as the SCA itself explains: “Society members create a persona, the person who they would like to have been had they lived in the Middle Ages. Some SCA members have chosen only a name. Others have fully developed personas and can talk to you in detail about their medieval ‘lives’” (SCA 8). The creation of an illusory and fictive (even if based on history) world, creating characters, staying in character while engaged in an activity, and some of the combat play would presuppose elements similar to those found in a LARP.

Another possible influence comes from historical re-enactments, such as Civil War battle re-fights, or historical sites that employ performers to portray the people from a past era. Again, the performers are adopting a persona in a world that is no longer real, if it ever was. Also of

influence might be murder-mystery parties, where participants are given a persona, and have to figure out “whodunit?” This type of entertainment is closer to a LARP in the sense that it has a scripted plot, and participants who are “in” on what will be happening over the course of the role-play. Along these lines of thinking, one might even find precedent in the parlor theatricals of Victorian America. Though it is more stage-y, you still have a group of amateurs getting together to dress up in costumes, adopt a character, and play pretend in their own home. Even kids’ games are fair game: “In Live-Action, players dress, speak and act as their characters. This form of role-play is similar to childhood games of ‘make-believe’” (Myrhe 63). Any cursory research into the history of LARP in America finds a number of possible precedents to the modern-day LARP. Among all this conjecture is one predecessor that we can be sure about, the tabletop RPGs described earlier in this chapter. The adjective “live-action” could not modify “role-playing games” if the latter did not already exist.

But the history ofLARPs is not the only murky aspect of the medium. Defining just what a LARP is can be difficult. Unlike RPGs, LARPs have very few “universal” elements to them. Sure, more often than not, GMs (or equivalent peoples) “run” the games. Player-characters “play” the game, and they work with the GM to engage in interactive storytelling. After that, a LARP can take a variety of shapes and structures. For the purposes of this project, I will look at two varying and prominent types of LARP: the more traditional, structure-laden LARPs found in the U.S. and those found in the U.K. These are usually based off an existing RPG property, and can be described in relation to it: “Live-Action role-play involves players in not only the mental fantasies of tabletop role-playing, but more significantly, within a physical environment that overlays the everyday world” (Myrhe 63). Then there are the more free-form, theatrical style of

live-action role-play that is popular in Scandinavia, known as “*laiv*.” These contrasting LARP styles will both help us understand the more specific and unique LARP that is *CTHULHU LIVES*.

The most popular LARP in America, the *D&D* ofLARPs, if you will, is *Mind’s Eye Theatre*, published and supported by White Wolf Publishing. It has all the trademarks of the mainstream, commercial LARPs in America. Primarily, it is based upon a pre-existing set of RPGs, White Wolf’s *World of Darkness* games. Though we will see that the structures differ between tabletop and live-action games, these LARPs occur in the same imaginary-entertainment environment as the *World of Darkness* RPGs. Most conventional LARPs do the same: build themselves onto an already-existing title. In theory, gamers could carry stories and characters over between the tabletop and live-action mediums, though such a thing is more possible than it is practical.¹¹

These LARPs borrow more than backgrounds and setting from RPGs. Often, the two share similar elements. A conventional LARP’s participants will consist of a GM (sometimes more than one) and the player-characters, same as the tabletop games. LARPs, however, depart from RPGs on the subject of NPCs. A GM cannot feasibly portray all the characters that the players will encounter in a game. Therefore, the GM often recruits other people to portray these non-player characters. These roles differ from player-characters in one very important way: “The NPCs have some foreknowledge of the game’s plot, planned events, and the truth behind the mystery” (Branney and Leman 20). Since these people know at least some of the basic direction of the story, they are not considered as “players,” though they engage in play. Often, their characters are not completely autonomous; rather, the characters are played in a way that is informed by the plot. “The Keeper needs to brief the NPCs very thoroughly, discussing the

¹¹ Even when the commercial LARP’s system is similar to the RPG it is based upon, there are still differences. Sometimes, porting characters from one system to the other requires some translation.

characters, plot and anticipated turn of events, and giving them some ideas for what to do in the likely event that things don't go as planned" (Branney/Leman 21). Finally, a person may also participate as a type of stagehand. Though not all games will require them, it is occasionally necessary to have a support staff to help coordinate events and NPCs as a stage manager or running crew might.

Character portrayal is not the only difference between tabletop RPGs and their kindred LARPs. Though structurally unique, conventional LARPs do have elements drawn from tabletop structures and systems. Still present are the character description and event resolution aspects, somewhat altered. With character description, attributes and appearance have a little less flexibility; you cannot claim that your character is a track star in the latest fashions if you are out of shape and are wearing worn jeans. But skills and abilities can be created without being limited by a player's limitations. Myhre describes how the group he was involved in created character skill sets without carrying a character sheet along with them: "Personal attributes are quantified according to physical, mental and social capacity, abilities and skills, and magical disciplines. These attributes are represented by adjectives... Each point of strength in the table-top version of *Vampire* is represented by a word in the live-action game" (65). Many LARPs will rely upon verbal cues to let the GM or other players know that they are using a skill or ability. One example of how this plays out in resolution will be demonstrated later in this chapter. The final character descriptor that Holcomb mentions is also present in LARPs. Most game systems will account for hit points, single-use skills, and experience points; it depends on the system and the group whether the GM or the individual players keep track of these tallies. Experience still has to be cleared through GMs, though, and still works in a similar way: "Players were rewarded experience points by attending scheduled games and by inspirational role-play. Experience

points were used to increase character proficiencies... Characters became more powerful through experience and proficient role-play” (Myhre 88). Again, experience provides added motivation for people to show up and play; even the newest character can build up her abilities by showing up to events and playing well.

Event resolution is one of the big departures from tabletop RPGs. It is still necessary in conventional LARPs, but is present in another form. Simply put, you cannot roll dice in a LARP. As Sean Branney, one of the *CTHULHU LIVES* creators, claims, it is a logistical problem to say, “‘Well, let me pull out my skill card and roll the dice... ah, it’s a 22, so...’”, remarking that doing so “pulls you out of the experience, instead of going ‘uagh’ and falling to the ground, in the mud” (Interview). The trick then becomes, how does a game resolve events without dice, without breaking the action? How do players announce that they’re using skills the characters have that the players are incapable of? Myhre’s explanation of how such things were handled in the Mind’s Eye Theatre games provides one example:

My character, Isaiah Asper, is having a conversation with greater antagonist Spyder the Malkavian. Spyder would incorporate the following statement into his conversation with my character Isaiah, ‘Cleverly I Dominate you to Sleep!’ Clever is the mental trait Spyder-P has chosen to initiate his challenge, and Dominate is the name of the magical power [i.e., discipline] he is using to put Isaiah to sleep. I would respond by saying, ‘well I am too observant to fall sway to your trickery, Spyder,’ and would hold out my clenched fist and await Spyder-P doing the same. In this case, I have chosen Observant as my defensive trait. Spyder-P and

I would play rock-paper-scissors to determine if he was successful
in dominating Isaiah to sleep. (65-6)

Though different games handle resolution in different ways, this example demonstrates one possibility. Other games might use a deck of cards on each person, hand signals, or a slowing down of game time to mimic dramatic slow-motion scenes from films.

Besides the system, LARP sessions are a marked departure from the tabletop event. Though a LARP's story takes place in a fictive setting, the game sessions occur in real, physical locations and contain characters performed by moving, breathing people. All of this, with the occasional exceptions, takes place in real-time, with the idea of game-time only invoked in certain situations (combat or emergencies, for example). GMs in a LARP have less flexibility in creating plot, due to the fact that they are usually confined to the physical locations they have access to. Such games often take place at a site predetermined by the GM(s): a convention hall, a park, residences in the same area, for example. The flickering aspect of the keying process that Mackay describes is less present inLARPs. Players are expected to stay in-character for the majority of the session's duration, and letting others know you were "out-of-character" has to be signaled by some means besides saying it. "During the game, out-of-character actions were signified by displaying one's index and middle finger over one's left collarbone. It was vital for participants to recognize when other players were in- or out-of-character, so to distinguish between players and their characters" (Myrhe 95). Despite these signals, metagaming is still a significant factor in LARP session. Since LARPs are rarely one-shot games, continuity is a huge part of gameplay, metagaming included. The metagaming aspect also extends to the LARP community. For example, in the *World of Darkness* LARPs, many of the administrative position-holders of a local Camarilla club will have their positions reflected in game. In fact, creating

regional and local Camarilla organizations hearkens back to the SCA, whose kingdoms are run (in the fictional and real worlds) by kings and queens chosen at tournaments.

Before moving on to discuss more specific games in the next chapter, it is pertinent to look at another style of live-action role-playing, which I will differentiate from conventional LARPs by terming “*laiv* play.” In his dissertation, Norwegian sociologist Geir Tore Brenne describes a live-action form that takes place primarily in Nordic countries. Though it is a type of live-action role-playing, Brenne writes that he “questions the extent to which there is a similarity between larp and *laiv*. I don’t think there is any reason to take this connection for granted” (15). This tenebrous connection is evident throughout Brenne’s descriptions, as well as the Dogma 99¹² manifesto written by a group of Nordic LARPers. Even the basic session is viewed in a different manner: Brenne refers to a *laiv* event as a “play,” as opposed to a game session. But the broad influences he gives for *laiv* not only echo the difficulty in describing the medium, but also point up many similarities with conventional LARPs:

As a leisure activity, [*laiv*] combines elements from a range of different activities:

-traditional and improvised theatre

-FRP (fantasy role-playing) such as *Dungeons & Dragons*,

or *Vampire*

¹² In 1995, a small collective of Danish filmmakers gathered in Copenhagen and wrote a manifesto on bringing purity and art back to filmmaking. They created a 10-point “Vow of Chastity” that other filmmakers must follow in order to be a Dogma film.

Drawing inspiration from these filmmakers, a group of Scandinavian LARPers created Dogma 99, “a programme for the liberation of LARP.” They also published a manifesto and a Vow of Chastity, and run games based upon these restrictions. Their goal is to bring LARP to a form of art, primarily by dispensing with anything that is primarily derived from tabletop RPGs.

Aesthetically, Dogma 99 is very reminiscent of the Naturalist movement in theatre. It stresses complete representation and realism, as well as dedicated but unobtrusive playwrights: “The LARP scenario may be a slice of reality. In real life, there are no main plots.”

- boys [sic] scout activities
- make-believe play of children, such as ‘cowboys and indians’
- performance art
- historical re-enactments (14-5)

Though tabletop RPGs are cited as influences, the *laiv* plays Brenne describes are more akin to improv performance than a game. And if the *laiv* play follows the Dogma 99 “Vow of Chastity,” this is even more true, as vow #7 states: “LARPs inspired by table-top role-playing games are not accepted” (Fatland and Wingård). In general, there is no tallying, no character “stats,” and rarely a sense of event resolution. Character description and generation is not based on quantifiable skill sets and attributes, but rather a short written summary, similar to what an actor might create for a role. These character descriptions are rarely longer than a single page,

“some of the following may be included:

- Character traits and skills...
- Questions...
- A list of other characters important for the player to contact and clarify aspects of their relation in the play.
- An overview of the daily routine tasks for the character
- A short biography of the character. (Brenne 16)

Character portrayal is similar to a total immersion experience, where, if a player is in sight and not in trouble, he or she is always in-character. *Laiv*-style events also wildly depart in the area of

plotting. Whereas conventionalLARPs usually incorporate a definitive main plot, *laiv* plays rarely have an overarching plot. Instead, the focus is upon the individual plots of each character, and the organizers might introduce small happenings over the course of the play. This is taken even further in Dogma 99 *laiv* plays: “There shall be no ‘main plot.’ (The story of the event must be made for each player’s character, not the whole.)” The focus in these events is on the characters’ experiences and the naturalistic “slice of life” over a coherent story. As we will see when looking at the HPLHS, elements from both of these styles of live-action role-play found their way into the evolving game of *CTHULHU LIVES*. Before discussing *CTHULHU LIVES*, though, we need to first look at the specific imaginary-entertainment environment and RPG that directly influenced the game.

3. HPL: ONE MAN, THREE LETTERS, ILLIMITABLE INFLUENCE

"I can't imagine what I'd be doing now, if it weren't for HPL. He and his work have planted countless seeds in the minds of countless individuals, and in many cases those seeds have sprouted and planted new seeds, fertilizing other minds and enriching other lives in ways that very few creative people's successes have ever done."

John Tynes, "Dread Page of Azathoth," *The Unspeakable Oath* #11

HPL

This is the tale of a storyteller who would not be forgotten. In America in the 1920s and '30s, pulp magazines were a cheap and common diversion. A dime might get you a cheaply-printed magazine with a handful of short pieces of genre fiction. These publications were printed on paper made from pulpwood scraps, sported four-color covers with garish art, and emblazoned with names like *Argosy*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Weird Tales*. Most stories and authors contained in these magazines are since forgotten, known now primarily to aficionados of this pulp fiction, and by the popular culture they inspired.¹

Such should have been the fate of this particular storyteller. He was a recluse, an antiquarian, and a xenophobe. His supernatural horror stories appeared in the pulp magazines alongside of those forgotten writers. Many have described these stories as overwrought, and the prose therein as purple. Even his fans knew he wasn't the most gifted wordsmith: "his technical shortcomings are apparent to even the most insensitive reader; one may as well complain that the Venus de Milo has no arms" (J. Turner ix). He suffered under pulp editors antagonistic to his writing. His quantity and quality of production lessened as he battled pancreatic cancer. He died from the disease at the age of forty-seven, never seeing his fiction published in anything other than the pulps. This is where the story of a forgotten writer would normally end, its subject relegated to dusty collections perused only by die-hard fans or curious academics.

¹ The most well-known being *The Shadow*, found on radio and television, and in comics and movies.

But the story of H.P. Lovecraft takes a dramatic posthumous turn, and it is due to *all* of his writing. Though Lovecraft is known today for his fiction, it is his other writings that saved his name from obscurity. An avid writer of letters to editors of various publications types, a series of Lovecraft's missives landed in the pages of the aforementioned *Argosy*. As Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi tells it, this series of letters impressed Edward F. Daas, the main man at the United Amateur Press Association (UAPA). Daas invited Lovecraft to become involved in the world of the amateur press, which he did:

The amateur journalism movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is now such a little-known phenomenon—and one that was so typical of its time—that it is now difficult to recapture its essence; but we should make the effort to do so, for it was perhaps the most important force in Lovecraft's adult life.

(Joshi 6)

After a few years, Lovecraft had even published a couple of the short stories he had written as a youth. A colleague impressed upon him to write more, and the canon that H.P. Lovecraft would be known for had begun. In addition to his own fiction, he also ghost-wrote for other writers, most notably “Imprisoned with the Pharaohs,” ghost-written for Harry Houdini. Ever the amateur journalist, he also published a lengthy essay on the literary genre he wrote in, entitled “Supernatural Horror in Fiction.” Most importantly, Lovecraft was an avid correspondent; he wrote reams of letters to friends, colleagues, and protégés. As Joshi describes, “he was the hub of a complex network of epistolary ties with other writers in the horror and science fiction fields” (20). This correspondence ranged all over the spectrum, from mundane conversational topics to critiquing and encouraging new writers. Of special note are his letters encouraging others to use

the supernatural background from his stories: “Lovecraft good-naturedly began to encourage his young protégés as well as colleague-correspondents like [Clark Ashton] Smith to expand the lore by additions of their own” (Price xiii). As a result, the ideas and eldritch names that littered Lovecraft’s fiction found their way into the tales of such contemporaries as Robert Bloch, Ramsey Campbell, Robert E. Howard, Frank Belknap Long, and August Derleth.

It was this last correspondent that may have been the primary reason for Lovecraft not lapsing into obscurity. Derleth was a writer known for his Sherlock Holmes knock-off (Solar Pons), macabre fiction in *Weird Tales*, and primarily for his Sac Prairie and Wisconsin sagas, stories set against the lushly-described background of rural Wisconsin. He also founded, with another pulp writer and Lovecraft correspondent (Donald Wandrei), the Arkham House publishing company. The cornerstone publications of this company were the anthologies of Lovecraft’s work, as well as those who were part of the author’s circle of friends. Through these anthologies, the stories of H.P. Lovecraft would survive on to influence some of the biggest names in horror and supernatural storytelling in the last half decade: Clive Barker, Mike Mignola, Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore, Brian Lumley, Stuart Gordon, Guillermo del Toro, and Stephen King.² Multi-medium writer and game designer John Tynes describes the importance of this ability to influence: “In a sense, the creative inspiration HPL has engendered on many of his fans is a greater gift than the work he left behind” (“Dread” 1). Of these works, Lovecraft’s most enduring legacy is the creation of the Cthulhu Mythos, a problematic term if ever there was one.

The reason for this problem lies with Lovecraft’s “savior,” August Derleth. As the primary publisher of Lovecraft’s works, Arkham House was also in the position of offering the “definitive” interpretation of Lovecraft’s fiction. Derleth not only collected Lovecraft’s work,

² In addition, there is HPL’s influence on underground rock bands such as H.P. Lovecraft, Dead Meadow, and The Darkest of the Hillside Thickets.

but also decided to codify the “mythos” behind the author’s writing; Derleth called it the Cthulhu Mythos, named for the monstrous creature in “Call of Cthulhu.” In the anthologies and his own Lovecraftian stories, Derleth added a postscript outlining the shape of the Mythos. He described it as having a “similarity to the Christian mythos,” and that the “evil” entities are akin to Satan.³ He also said the Mythos suggests “parallels to the elementals of air, earth, water, etc.” (Derleth 245-6). This “elemental theory” was first posited by HPL fan Francis T. Laney, and Derleth ran with it.⁴ Where there were “gaps” in the elemental interpretation (and there were many in this theory), Derleth would write and publish stories to fill said gaps. One such example was the fiery entity Cthugha (created “in a singularly uninspired moment,” horror editor Robert M. Price quipped (xv)).

Shortly after Derleth’s death in 1971, a movement to re-examine the Cthulhu Mythos began. Two of the big names in this were fiction author Richard Tierney and psychology professor Dirk Mosig. The former published an essay entitled “The Derleth Mythos,” while the latter took an academic and analytical reinterpretation of Lovecraft’s stories. The general timbre of these studies on Lovecraft is one that is less name- and monster-centric. Rather than focusing on the Mythos as a gazette of delightfully unholy names, such writers have attempted to restore the “true” intent of HPL’s stories. Though such reinterpretation revolutionized the view of Lovecraft’s work, and introduced the idea of “Lovecraft Studies,” later writers have started questioning these versions of the Mythos. In his introduction to a collection of pulp stories from the original circle of Lovecraft, editor Price lauded Mosig and company for looking at the

³ Though Derleth’s comparison to Christianity was problematic, it was not completely off-base. Lovecraft drew from a wide array of religions and myths, including the mysticism found in less-mainstream sects of Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions.

⁴ Exactly who started the elemental theory is debated by Lovecraft fans. Did Laney publish it, and the influential Derleth adopt and promote it? Or did Laney elaborate on something Derleth had first mentioned? The assertion in this study is from Robert M. Price’s introduction to *Tales of the Lovecraft Mythos*.

Mythos in a new light; he then chided them for pulling their own Derlethian attempt at codification: “But the pendulum swung fully to the other extreme as Mosig proceeded to substitute his own abstract system for Derleth’s, setting forth his own systematic philosophy of Lovecraft’s fiction and criticizing not only Derleth (explicitly) but even Lovecraft (implicitly) for failing to stick to it” (Price xvii). Since then, for every person who theorizes on how to interpret Lovecraft, there is another who points out the holes in said theories.

Of all the names in Lovecraft Studies currently, the two big ones currently are Price and Joshi. The two have views that disagree on certain points, and they have had lively verbal disagreements at conferences. Though there are differing ways of approaching the Cthulhu (or Lovecraft) Mythos, most fans and scholars agree that HPL’s cosmicism is and should be the central focus of anything “Lovecraftian.” Joshi defines HPL’s idea of cosmicism as thus: “This is the idea that, given the vastness of the universe both in space and in time, the human race (now no longer regarded as the special creation of a divine being) is of complete inconsequence *in the universe-at-large*, although it may well be of some importance on the earthly scale” (12).

All this arguing and interpreting brings us back to the idea expressed by John Tynes at the beginning of the chapter. Most of these arguments are played out in the amateur press, ‘zines, HPL film festivals, gaming or literary conventions, and the Internet forums. Joshi and Price are an example of one of the big rifts in Lovecraft studies and fandom. One comes from a more academic background, the other more in publishing and gaming. Many of the more scholarly Lovecraft aficionados grumble about games based on Lovecraft’s works, the primary of which is the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG, published by Chaosium, Inc. The primary disdain comes from the nature of an RPG, as discussed in the previous chapter. The tabletop RPG codifies and quantifies the characters in it—exactly what Mosig et al were railing against. The crux behind their

complaint is this: in Lovecraft's stories, entities such as Cthulhu and Nyarlathotep are bizarre beings beyond human comprehension. In an RPG, these entities are given statistics; this makes them, in theory, comprehensible and open to "defeat." Other critics of the *Cthulhu* RPG will also point out the antiquarian Lovecraft's disdain for games, but often this is in more of an ironic observation than an argument. Such a divide between the more popular culture Lovecraft adherents and the more scholarly fans grows and lessens throughout the years. For example, this is how a game and fiction writer described the second NecronomiCon⁵ event: "There also didn't seem to be any of last con's 'scholars vs. gamers' attitudes this time out—it was more of a feeling of a united community" (Aniolowski 31). It is not uncommon that creative figures would have differing opinions on the interpretation of his work, especially seventy years after its creation. And since Lovecraft encouraged others to borrow and expand upon his names and ideas, such disagreement is to be expected. In this study, however, the scholarly and the gaming have to co-exist. On that note, we have now come to the end of the story of Howard Philips Lovecraft, and must now move on to one of the more interesting entertainment properties developed from his Cthulhu Mythos, the aforementioned RPG, *Call of Cthulhu*.

Translation into a new medium: *Call of Cthulhu*, the Game

In 1981, game designer Sandy Petersen added another title to the list of RPGs growing in the wake of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Fusing the in-house RPG system at Chaosium with Lovecraft's stories and milieu, Petersen was the primary author behind *Call of Cthulhu: Horror Roleplaying*. He had been working on a revision of Chaosium's *RuneQuest*⁶ and it is this game

⁵ NecronomiCon is an off-and-on festival celebrating all things Lovecraft, which tries to be annual. It should not be confused with the Necronomicon event, an annual convention for fans of genre fiction and films, as well as games.

⁶ *RuneQuest* was an early influential RPG that ended up in corporate limbo. Chaosium sold the name and publishing rights, but not the system, to Avalon Hill. After the mid-'80s, though Avalon Hill made multiple attempts, they could never get a finished *RuneQuest* project onto the shelves. The final attempt was put on hiatus after the company was bought by Hasbro. The rights to the name (but still not the system) now belong to Issaries, Inc.

“from which the mechanics of *Call of Cthulhu* were adapted via the intermediary and [now] out-of-print *Basic Roleplaying*” (Petersen and Willis 4). The result is was (and is) one of the most unique and unconventional mainstream RPGs in the industry. The initial reception was extraordinarily positive: “At that time, three major national awards were issued in the United States for excellence in game design. *Call of Cthulhu* won all three” (Petersen 6). In the intervening years, the game has gone through six editions, ups and downs in quality and commercial viability, and been elected into the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts and Design hall of fame. *Call of Cthulhu* took RPGs in some different directions, as will be explored in this section.⁷ Such difference has been a burden and a blessing; on one hand, the game has little chance of ever becoming as popular as *D&D* or the *World of Darkness*. On the other hand, regular players laud the fact that “Experimentation has always been part of *Call of Cthulhu*; from its original concept, the Sanity system or *Masks of Nyarlathotep*” (Crossingham 4). This experimentation is expressed in many ways. The original concept of Lovecraftian horror has resulted in a game where player-characters are constantly in jeopardy of dying or going insane every game; it hearkens to melodrama, with the exception that protagonists can and do suffer ignominious deaths when least expected.⁸ *Masks of Nyarlathotep* is considered to be one of the greatest published campaigns for any RPG. It was a globe-hopping, non-linear Lovecraftian campaign that was rife with horrifying and memorable images. It was heavily researched and historically-based, and had a depth of atmosphere that few RPG campaigns in the early ‘80s even attempted.

Despite the ways that *Call of Cthulhu* distinguished itself from the industry archetype, there are many similar elements between the game and the basic RPG structure. Instead of being

⁷ An overview of the differences between *Call of Cthulhu* and *D&D* appears in Appendix C of this study.

⁸ Critics have commented that this lack of character longevity is the reason for *Call of Cthulhu*’s inability to gain in popularity. This is where the game starkly contrasts with the classic melodrama formula.

called a GM, the player running the game is known as the Keeper (as in, the Keeper of Forbidden Lore):

The player who acts as keeper becomes the game moderator.

Perhaps using a published scenario, or creating one of his or her own, the keeper knows the entire plot of the story and presents it during play, incidentally taking the parts of all the monsters, spooks, and sinister or ordinary people that the investigators meet.

The keeper has the responsibility for preparing a scenario without bias. He or she must make the opposition smart and mean, or there will be little challenge for the players, and they will be bored.

(Petersen and Willis 24)

The player-characters are referred to as Investigators, as the title reflects what their purpose in the game's world is. They are normal humans living in their respective eras, who just happen to have stumbled upon something wicked and outré. They are not superheroes or hardened warriors or gods amongst men and women, as the game explains:

The players take the parts of 'investigators' in the game, roles so-called because much of the game consists of searching for clues and evidence. It is an accident of alphabetization that the first skill on the alphabetical list of game skills is Accounting, yet it is also telling that the first skill is not something like Aikido or Attack...

Investigators are not fighting machines. The single extraordinary thing about most investigators is what they come to know.

(Petersen and Willis 35)

As will be discussed later in this chapter, the game system reinforces the idea of regular humans possessing singular and irregular knowledge. The enjoyment in playing an Investigator comes not from slaying the dragon, but solving the horribly gelatinous, Lovecraftian puzzle.

The imaginary-entertainment environment in *Call of Cthulhu* is the Mythos with which Lovecraft and other writers peppered their stories. It is a setting that prides itself upon realism, albeit one in which humanity is an insignificant speck in the eyes of the Old Ones (and therefore the universe). Whether the game is set in medieval times, the 1980s, 1920s, or present day, the keeper is encouraged to develop a setting that is reasonably accurate; this includes the prevailing morals and ethics of the time:

While many or most RPGs offer simplistic worlds of good and evil, where good deeds are directly rewarded with treasure and power, *Call of Cthulhu* offers an ambiguous world where ‘doing the right thing’ almost always leads to self-sacrifice, if not self-destruction. It attracts players who do not always see our real world as a simplistic struggle of good vs. evil, but a place where shades of grey predominate. (Herber 4)

In any era, the primary reason to attempt a representational setting goes back to Lovecraft’s stories. Those tales were meticulously set in a scientific and realistic background (HPL would sometimes point out how he looked up the exact phase of a moon on a night just to make a story accurate) purposely, so that when the protagonist watched the rational world melting down around him, it felt just as real. Such is the idea behind *Call of Cthulhu*:

The purpose of horror roleplaying is to have a good time. Right down to the pounding hearts and sweating brows, it’s part of

human nature to find pleasure in being scared, as long as being scared is not for real. For some, the relaxation after the scare is the most important result. For others, it is the scare itself. *Call of Cthulhu* is a vehicle for alternately scaring and then reassuring players. (Petersen and Willis 25)

The atmosphere of believable cosmicism and supernatural horror is the most important factor in the stories that go into a *Call of Cthulhu* session.

The “real-world” setting is important for more than just atmosphere, though. As already mentioned, *Call of Cthulhu* departs from the normal RPG practice of players creating fantastical characters. Some sample occupations listed in the game for players include professions such as Author, Antiquarian, Detective, Dilettante, Doctor, Journalist, Professor, and so on. In the most basic sense, these occupations function the same way Holcomb describes it in the previous chapter: “An occupation is a way to explain the skills that a character has. Any number of occupations exist” (Petersen and Willis 42). In *Delta Green* (a modern-day version of *Call of Cthulhu* similar in style to *The X-Files* television show), for example, includes a forty-page appendix of government agencies from which to draw character occupations. In any era, this results in a player-character with relatively mundane skills and abilities. In fact, one of the most important skills in *Call of Cthulhu* is “**Library Use** [sic]—invaluable for locating evidence, clues, and background, but of no use at all in deciding what to do with them” (Petersen and Willis 69). These realistic skills in character description put the focus on investigation and role-playing: “A player has the duty to roleplay an investigator within the limits of the investigator’s personality and abilities. That is the point of roleplaying. Try to know as much or as little as the investigator would in life:” (Petersen & Willis 25). History, Archaeology, or Anthropology may

seem like boring and limited skills for a character to possess; that is, until you need to understand an ancient Egyptian relic before the mummy comes back to finish you off.

Appendix B is what a *Call of Cthulhu* character sheet looks like (this one is from the *Delta Green* version mentioned previously). Though there are similarities to the *D&D* sheet, the differences display how this game breaks from the traditional RPG mold.

INVESTIGATOR STATISTICS				
STR	DEX	INT	Idea	Damage Bonus
CON	APP	POW	Luck	Current Date
SIZ	SAN	EDU	Know	

Fig. 4. Investigator statistics (attributes), from Dennis Detwiller, Adam Scott Glancy, and John Tynes, *Delta Green* (Seattle: Pagan Publishing 1996) 298.

An investigators' attributes are similar to those on the *D&D* sheet, including such things as Strength, Constitution, and Intelligence (see fig. 4). Next to them, however, are three unique stats: Idea, Luck, and Know. Idea is based on a character's Intelligence, and is used in situations of understanding:

The Idea roll represents hunches and the ability to interpret the obvious. When no skill roll seems appropriate, this roll might show understanding of a concept or the ability to solve a pressing intellectual problem. The Idea roll is especially handy to show awareness: did the investigator observe and understand what he or she saw? Would a normal person have become aware of a particular feeling about a gathering or place? Is anything out of place on that hill? (Petersen and Willis 40)

Know is based off the Education attribute, and is a catch-all for random knowledge⁹ that might not be represented in a skill:

All people know bits of information about different topics. The Know roll represents what's stored in the brain's intellectual attic, calculated as the percentage chance that the investigator's education supplied the information. (Petersen and Willis 41)

These two attributes should already hint at what is truly important in *Call of Cthulhu*: knowledge, and the ability to “figure it out” (nobody can truly “figure out” the Mythos, but investigators can figure out that the murderer wasn't earthly). As for Luck? Well, this is the technical definition of its uses:

Did the investigator bring along some particular piece of gear? Is he or she the one the dimensional shambler decides to attack? Did the investigator step on the floorboard which breaks, or the one that squeaks? The Luck roll is a quick way to get an answer. (Petersen and Willis 40)

But as many *Cthulhu* players have found out, it is also an effective method of reinforcing the Lovecraftian milieu in a horror game:

As the Keeper, you are the embodiment of the unfeeling, uncaring Lovecraftian universe—yet this is impossible. Every human has feelings: likes, dislikes, moods, and loves. To show the players the uncaring randomness of the universe, as represented by the

⁹ It is not uncommon for RPGs to break down mental attributes into such divisions as Intelligence and Wisdom/Education; one represents the ability to reason/understand, the other describes the level of information stored in the memory.

Mythos, it is perfectly appropriate to turn the job of uncaring fate over to the dice... Being killed for no apparent reason is significantly more horrible than being killed for a reason. (Goodrich 7).

This hearkens back to the purpose of play in horror role-playing; there is no hard and fast rule for survival in a horror game. Your character lived, her partner died in the claws of that dimensional shambler. But it could have just as easily been your character.

Figure 5 is where such death is quantified; it is the area for a character's Magic and Hit Points. These numbers fit into Holcomb's description as types of tallies. Notice, however, that there is no space for experience points. This is because, unlike *D&D* and most other RPGs, a character in *Call of Cthulhu* does not have

"levels." Though an investigator may be a grizzled

veteran, and has increased his or her skills through experiences, he or she will always be just as frail and fallible as any other human. It does not matter if an investigator is a ten-year veteran or a rookie, a stray bullet or random flailing pseudopod can still kill them. Again, this is in line with the concept of a Lovecraftian imaginary-entertainment environment: no matter how many investigators foil the various manifestations of the Mythos, men and women die easily. The Old Ones are forever.

Looking at these tallies might raise one question: if *Call of Cthulhu* is supposed to take place in a realistic (if supernaturally, horrifyingly realistic) setting, why would an investigator have Magic points? The reason is twofold. The first of these is a mirror of the function of Hit

MAGIC POINTS						HIT POINTS					
Unconscious=						Dead=					
0	1					0	1	2			
2	3	4	5	6		3	4	5	6	7	
7	8	9	10	11		8	9	10	11	12	
12	13	14	15	16		13	14	15	16	17	
17	18	19	20	21		18	19	20	21	22	
22	23	24	25	26		23	24	25	26	27	

Fig. 5. Investigator magic and hit points (tallies), from Dennis Detwiller, Adam Scott Glancy, and John Tynes, *Delta Green* (Seattle: Pagan Publishing 1996) 298.

points. In the same way that Hit Points tally physical fortitude, in *Call of Cthulhu*, Magic points measure mental fortitude. This means that there are antagonists who can attack investigators mentally, as well as physically. This is another idea that harkens back to Lovecraft: in stories such as “The Call of Cthulhu,” victims could be affected through their dreams. The other use of Magic points in the RPG is for magic. This is a secondary use for them, however, as magic in the game is nothing like the fantastical spell-flinging you might see in *D&D* or a Harry Potter story. Rather, it more closely resembles historical pagan, shamanistic, or witchcraft types of “magic.” It is an attempt by a character to nudge reality, a “desperate manipulation of inimical forces.” But this is not a simple point and chant. “Mythos magic bewilders, shocks, disorients, and debilitates its human practitioners” (Petersen and Willis 89). For any sane and morally upstanding investigator, use of magic is a self-destructive endeavor. It may get results (if lucky), but it always draws from a small tally of Magic points; more importantly, it costs Sanity points.

But Sanity is more than just a cost for spells. At the top of the box in Figure 6, it is entitled “Sanity Points & Mental Health. It is this part of the game mechanics that is the hallmark of *Call of Cthulhu*. Whereas Magic and Hit points range from 0 to 26 (though no investigator can reach higher than 18), Sanity points range from 0 to 99. This is because, in a Lovecraftian game of horror, more important than physical or mental attacks is a character’s reaction to the

SANITY POINTS & MENTAL HEALTH																																	
(99-Cthulhu Mythos: ____)										Insanity =																							
19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47					
48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76					
77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99											
Phobias_____										Insanities_____																							

Fig. 6. Investigator sanity point and mental health (tally, description), from Dennis Detwiller, Adam Scott Glancy, and John Tynes, *Delta Green* (Seattle: Pagan Publishing 1996) 298.

breakdown of personal reality:

Sanity in the game is modeled after the behavior of protagonists in H.P. Lovecraft's fiction, who more than a few times faint or go mad. The characteristic SAN (Sanity) is the game's register of investigator flexibility and resilience to emotional trauma.

(Petersen and Willis 75)

The mental stability of an investigator is chipped away by horrifying experiences, such as a grisly murder scene, discovering a long-held belief to be a fallacy, reading forbidden tomes, witnessing "things that should not be," casting spells, and so on. But Sanity is more than just a means of incapacitating characters: "insanity can be used as a method of self-expression as well as a means of character disposal" (Bell¹⁰). Quantitatively, Sanity affects characters and scenarios in various ways. A single loss of five Sanity points or more (possibly due to an event or entity physically large or utterly alien) results in Temporary Insanity. This term defines a reaction that can result in instability for a few minutes to a few hours. If an investigator loses twenty percent of his total Sanity within an hour of "game time" (often because of a string of shocks to the system), that character goes Indefinitely Insane. Such a character is incoherent for a few months of game time. Though this effectively takes the investigator out of the current scenario, it allows for some dynamic role-playing in the future. Indefinite Insanity results in a continuing psychological condition; this is usually decided in agreement between player and keeper, and can be anything ranging from criminal psychosis to a severe case of Eisoptrophobia (fear of mirrors). Finally, there is what happens when an investigator reaches zero Sanity points: Permanent Insanity. For all intents and purposes, Permanent Insanity functions like a character's death.

¹⁰ The articles from the *Strange Eons* magazine are no longer available in print. However, the HPLHS has made them available as single-page Adobe Acrobat .pdf files. Hence, there is no page number associated with these citations.

Though alive, the investigator no longer has the mental stability to be a part of society. Such a fate is far from uncommon, both in the game and HPL's tales: "Lovecraft concludes more than one story with the intimation that a lifetime of madness for the narrator will follow" (Petersen and Willis 84). But the Sanity system does not end here.

If you look again at the Sanity box, you'll notice that the first item, before the tally for Sanity points, is the entry for "99 (minus) Cthulhu Mythos." This is another crucial game mechanic. Cthulhu Mythos is a skill that no investigator starts with, but increases through research and in-game experiences. It represents a basic knowledge, understanding, and ability to combat the elements of the Mythos. If you subtract an investigator's Cthulhu Mythos from 99, you get their maximum Sanity. In other words, an investigator's knowledge of the Mythos is inversely proportional to his or her Sanity. As the game describes it, the Cthulhu Mythos skill is "central to the game, but the more you rise in it, the more your mental stability shrinks. Every character is a prisoner of this skill" (Petersen and Willis 69). The higher it is, the better a character is at investigating, the more likely he or she will fall into Indefinite or Permanent Insanity.

These structural elements feed into the aesthetic elements of the game. First and foremost, *Call of Cthulhu* is a horror game. Therefore, Sanity plays a large part in creating the mood; players will sometimes physically cringe as they announce that their characters are looking in something the player knows might cost them Sanity. Combined with their low Hit points, investigators are fragile. The responsibility of the keeper is to consider this fragility when scripting and playing: "Very few people want to play a game where everyone is slaughtered in less time than it takes to create a character. On the other hand, playing the 'horror' game where there is no threat to life and limb can be just as stultifying" (Goodrich 6). Though they struggle

in an impossible and ultimately futile battle against the uncaring universe, the draw of a hero in *Call of Cthulhu* is akin to that of a firefighter or police officer: there is little glory, investigators will die or go insane, but they're "trying to make the world a better place in a way that only they can" (Tynes Introduction viii). Aesthetically, in the game's narrative, this encourages the dramatic possibilities of short-lived characters: "Such challenges may bring a long, rich life, or one as short and dramatic as a falling star" (Petersen and Willis 50). In fact, many players staunchly defend against the criticisms of more mainstream gamers, who think that an RPG should be "winnable," or come to a point where the characters should have a good change to live into old age:

In the "old school" of character making, players would create their characters with the intention of keeping them around forever, or until the Old Ones were finally thwarted forever, whichever came first. Although this allowed a player to have a very experienced, adept investigator, it also brought about some bad side effects. Players would often become too attached to their characters, which led to the challenge of playing a scenario with the intention of keeping your character alive at all costs. It became a competition for longevity when the characters should have been trying only to deal with the situation at hand. (Bell)

This viewpoint was printed in *Strange Eons*, a publication made by the HPLHS; though it discusses a LARP, the sentiment carries over to the tabletop version as well.

But the HPLHS live-action game is not the only attempt to bring the *Call of Cthulhu* product from tabletop to live-action. Robert McLaughlin and his group of gamers had a similar

idea. As we will see in this next section and the following chapter, there is no single, correct way to do this. In fact, in the first edition of McLaughlin's *Cthulhu Live*,¹¹ most of the photographs came from the HPLHS; also included was a short essay on the differing style that *CTHULHU LIVES* uses. Before addressing the focus of this thesis, it would be a good idea to examine the ways in which the *Cthulhu Live* LARP differs from the HPLHS game, *CTHULHU LIVES*.

Cthulhu Live: Fewer letters, more guidelines

Using the descriptions from the previous chapter, *Cthulhu Live* would be considered a conventional LARP, similar in style to *Mind's Eye Theatre*. Whereas the latter is based on the existing *World of Darkness* RPG, *Cthulhu Live* is drawn directly from the *Call of Cthulhu* game. This grounding is in the same imaginary-entertainment environment as *Call of Cthulhu*, as well as the mechanics. The primary difference is that “the rules of *Cthulhu Live* are streamlined and simpler than traditional role-playing games. The intent is to accommodate the requirements of live role-playing” (McLaughlin 2nd 8). This section will provide a short overview of how the two games differ, and how Robert McLaughlin used a pre-existing RPG to create a live-action version. It will offer a means of contrast for the next chapter.

Much like the tabletop game, the player in charge of a session of *Cthulhu Live* is known as the keeper. Again, this is the person in charge of running the game. Unlike in tabletop RPGs, the keeper does not play any NPCs in *Cthulhu Live*; instead, “the Keeper typically remains in the background as an ‘invisible’ observer, except when needed to resolve actions and adjudicate rules issues” (McLaughlin 2nd 8). Even more than with a tabletop game, one of the primary duties of the keeper in this LARP is to prepare. Assuming he or she has drummed up players for a game session, the keeper must then script a scenario. There are fewer published LARP scenario than

¹¹ While the first edition was published by Chaosium, the second was published by Fantasy Flight Games, a company licensed to publish Cthulhu-related products. In either case, this is still the “official live-action version of the... *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game” (McLaughlin 2nd 6).

there are for the *Cthulhu* RPG; in addition, scenarios are not as easy to generalize, as they often will depend upon the cast and locations available to a keeper. At the same time, the keeper must enlist the NPCs¹² that will be involved in a scenario, as well as a stage manager. This latter person is in charge of coordination and timing behind the scenes, as well as filling in as an assistant keeper in larger-scale games. Enlistment can be done at any time in the preparation process, though a script might have to be revised depending on how many NPCs are available.

To this end, a keeper must also figure out whether each NPC in a scenario is designated as “major” or “minor.” The purpose of this designation is not to define how important an NPC is to a plot; instead, it is a measure of how much time an NPC will likely spend in the session. This way, a keeper can use minor NPC actors in multiple roles, or as stagehands. “In this way, a cast of eight actors may offer the Keeper a pool of three to four major NPCs and a dozen minor ones to draw from” (McLaughlin 1st 86). After a script is finalized, the keeper must make sure that locations are secure, any relevant authorities are notified of what is happening, and all props and monsters are made and game-worthy. Once this is all in place, there is still more preparation. All the “conspirators” (keeper, NPCs, stage manager) must be on the same page. It is the keeper’s responsibility to arrange pre-game meetings with this group. The goal of these meetings is to discuss, in detail, the possibilities and probabilities of the plot. Since this is a LARP, the script is not a final narrative—therefore, players can and will take it in strange and unexpected directions. “That’s why selecting good NPCs is so important. Quick improvisations are crucial to live role-playing” (McLaughlin 1st 87). Also important for the keeper to stress is the necessity for NPCs to stay in character and in the game world. If a player has questions about mechanics or gameplay during a session, he should know to ask the keeper. In addition, another item “is very important

¹² Like the tabletop RPG, non-player characters (NPCs) are the individuals that Investigators interact with during the course of a game. In a LARP, though, a keeper cannot possibly portray every NPC, as he would do in an RPG.

for all NPCs to understand: You are not competing against the players. NPCs play their roles, they do not play to win the game” (McLaughlin 1st 87). Finally, if he is using NPCs as stagehands, the keeper needs go to over what they will be responsible during the session. Especially when using a limited number of actual locations to represent a large number of fictional ones, the keeper can ill-afford to have snafus occur during scene changes: “The Keeper appoints an NPC to oversee scene changes and provides him with diagrams showing where furniture and props are placed in each different setting” (McLaughlin 1st 88). Once the lengthy task of preparation is complete, the keeper still has to run the game; a momentous task at the least. “You’ll juggle many issues at once: ensure NPC’s understand their roles; keep players under control, run about making sure the monsters are awake; and constantly be called on to decide Skill Tests and rules issues” (McLaughlin 1st 89). During this time, the NPCs and stagehands have their directions; the keeper will primarily be interacting with players.

Since *Cthulhu Live* is a conventional LARP, it has a game system that is a direct descendent of the tabletop RPG on which it is based. In the area of character description/generation, a *Cthulhu Live* investigator has only four attributes, instead of the eight a *Call of Cthulhu* investigator has. These are Dexterity, Constitution, Education, and Power.

No Strength score is used (to the chagrin of thousands of armchair barbarians). Combat occupies only a small part of any game session, and physical contact is forbidden. No Intelligence score is used. You must use your own wits to solve the puzzles with which you’re confronted. No Charisma score is used. You’ll have to rely on your natural charm, or lack thereof, when interacting with other characters. (McLaughlin 2nd 14)

(Appearance is also missing, but that's because in *Cthulhu Live*, your Appearance is, well, your appearance.) Each player is given forty-five points to distribute between the four attributes; in *Cthulhu Live*, an average human attribute is ten. Investigators must put at least three points in each attribute, and no more than twenty. Figure 7 is an example of a character "sheet" for *Cthulhu Live*. Instead of a full page, the character "sheet" is closer to the size of an index card. The main reason for this is that keepers are responsible for having a copy of each player's character sheet. This way, they can cross-reference a player's skills and attributes when attempting event resolution.¹³

Player Name:	
Character Name:	Age:
Occupation:	Nationality:
EDU:	Wound Points:
DEX:	Sanity Points:
CON:	Magic Points:
POW:	Experience:
Skills:	

Fig. 7. Investigator sheet, from Robert McLaughlin, *Cthulhu Live*, 1st ed. (Oakland: Chaosium 1997) 110.

Though skills are based upon profession, like in *Call of Cthulhu*, a player acquires them in a different manner. "Skills are specialized fields of knowledge the character acquired in his professional education or talents picked up through special interests and hobbies" (McLaughlin 2nd 13). Rather than putting points in them to increase the likelihood of passing a dice roll, skills simply mean that an investigator can attempt any actions covered by that skill: "There are no levels of mastery for skills. There are no dice to be rolled. A character's success or failure is

¹³ In the second edition of *Cthulhu Live*, the size of the sheet was increased to a half-sheet of paper. It is still smaller than an RPG sheet, but now contains sections for "Possessions" and "History and Notes" (McLaughlin 2nd 138).

judged by the Keeper and based on the character's ability scores" (McLaughlin 2nd 16). A more detailed description of how skills work in *Cthulhu Live* will be presented in the section on event resolution. For now, skills are "bought" when a character is created. Each skill costs a varying number of points (usually between two, like Accounting, and four, like Medicine). After attribute values are determined, a player can "buy" a skill set equal to his Education score. The other way to increase the number of skills is through Experience points.

Unlike its tabletop forbearer, *Cthulhu Live* does utilize Experience points. This is a tally that goes up at the end of a game, assuming a character survives. "These points may be used to purchase new skills or to increase abilities, or may be saved for future use. Two to three points is the average experience reward" (McLaughlin 2nd 51). Of course, this reward is at the discretion of the keeper. Again, there is little worry that a character will become über-powerful; this is, after all, a Lovecraftian LARP. Investigators have the same low tallies in Hit and Magic points. The first is equal to an investigator's Constitution, the second on his or her Power attribute (meaning these will never go above twenty). In addition, Sanity functions in the same way that it does in *Call of Cthulhu*. Five points at once is a temporary breakdown, and twenty percent in an hour means lunacy. But the players do not know the exact tallies while they are in game. The keeper holds the cards, and therefore "The Keeper informs you when you've experienced a cerebral crisis, and gives brief instructions such as, 'You've panicked! Flee the room immediately!' or 'You've just lost it, buddy! Curl on the floor and start whimpering!'" (McLaughlin 2nd 50-1). But with all these numbers, as streamlined as they are, still are meaningless without a resolution system.

Event resolution in *Cthulhu Live* is also simplified from its parent game. There are two types of resolution, Skill Tests, and the Combat system. The Skill Test is the most common.

There are over thirty of the aforementioned character skills that an investigator might possess. Each skill corresponds with one of the investigator's four attributes. When a Skill Test is called for, the companion attribute number is compared to the Success Score of a feat. If that attribute matches or is greater than the Success Score, the player succeeds at the Skill Test. When scripting a scenario, the keeper will set a Success Score for each action he or she writes into the script. He or she must also be able to improvise a Success Score when necessary. A Score usually ranges from five (relatively easy) to twenty (nearly impossible). To use a skill, a player jumps into the constative frame (as the addresser): "I am going to Sneak around this corner," as she is tip-toeing slowly towards the corner of the abandoned warehouse. To do so, she must have the Sneak skill, which uses the Dexterity attribute. If the keeper sets the Success Score at ten, her Dexterity must at least be ten to succeed. Players do not know Success Scores; they announce their action and hope for the best. Once the player announces her attempt, and enacts the necessary action, the Keeper announces whether or not the Test was successful. There are ways to increase success in a Skill Test. The first of these is through teamwork (if others have the same requisite skill), the other is good role-playing:

As a tip to players, the Keeper usually increases your chances of success if you're doing a good job of role-playing. Always stay in character. Don't just point at a mysterious statue and say that you want to use your Archaeology skill. Pick it up, if you can, and examine the craftsmanship. Test how hard the material is with a thumbnail, tap to see if it's hollow, and pull a notebook from your pocket to check your 'notes.' This applies to all skills.

(McLaughlin 1st 28)

Sanity and magic use the same resolution system as skills, though there are slight differences in the timing. In either case, the Success Score is compared against the Power attribute, though Sanity Tests cannot gain increases through teamwork or good role-playing. It's a Lovecraftian game, so going insane is a regular and expected occurrence.

Combat, however, is a different monster (pun intended). Everything in a *Cthulhu Live* game takes place in real time. There are only two exceptions. First, players or the keeper can ask to fast forward time if there is no conflicting elements (i.e., the players want to use First Aid during downtime, or the keeper wants an evening to pass). The other exception is for offensive acts:

A *Cthulhu Live* game shifts from real to abstract time whenever a combat situation develops. A combat situation occurs when someone commits an offensive act. Offensive acts include drawing a ranged or melee weapon, starting to cast a spell, a verbal threat, or the appearance of a creature that requires a Sanity Test (McLaughlin 2nd 39-40)

Specifically, when combat happens, time is broken down into abstract segments known as “rounds;” each combat round is roughly equivalent to ten seconds. During a combat round, events are broken down into five phases: declaration, movement, ranged, melee, and resolution. In the first edition of *Cthulhu Live*, players were given a deck of index cards prior to the game, labeled with the numbers one through twenty, as well as the words “Flee” and “Dodge.” A slightly complex system of showing Offense and Defense values were used. In the second edition, combat was simplified. During declaration, “characters begin to role-play the actions they will take during the rest of the round” (McLaughlin 2nd 40). This role-playing is followed by

any accompanying movement in the following phase. When the ranged and melee phases happen, each player makes one of four hand signals, meaning “Attack,” “Split,” “Defend,” or “Flee.” If a player Attacks, he applies all his Dexterity score to attack. If he signals Split, half the Dexterity will go to attacking, half to defense. Defend means the entire score is used in defense, and Flee is an attempt to leave combat. With all the combats, if an attacker has a higher score than the defender, the difference is the resulting damage. During resolution, the keeper announces the results of all actions, combat or not.¹⁴ Though the Keeper has all the character tallies on his clipboard, it is up to each investigator and NPC to keep track of their individual hit points; there is too much happening simultaneously for the Keeper to track this for each individual. Once all offensive acts are accounted for, and if there are no more such acts planned, the game resumes in real time.

All of these mechanics might seem cumbersome. There are a lot of mathematics and mechanics that occur during the course of a session. But all of this is akin to the methods used by directors and playwrights in crafting a stage drama. They are systems used, but not seen by an audience, to tell a narrative. The *Cthulhu Live* book emphasizes this fact:

Test resolution is intended to be transparent to the players. All players know their own ability scores, but the Keeper should never reveal Success Scores and special modifiers. Don't talk your way through the process.

Hmmmm. You have a 14 Education, and it would normally take a 16 with your History skill to recall the name of the Crown Prince of Liechtenstein in 1895. Of course, it says here that your

¹⁴ This is a horribly simplified version of how the system works. The Keeper also adds in applicable character skills and the effects of armor, and calculates it quickly. For those who prefer a less technical combat system, *Cthulhu Live* does describe an alternate system that utilizes the common LARP practice of paper-rock-scissors.

character is from Liechtenstein, so I'd allow 2 points in your favor to succeed.

Never do this. It opens a hole in the veil of illusion by introducing game mechanics the players don't need to know. The Keeper maintains his cool, quiet aura while silently deciding the Skill Test.

(McLaughlin 2nd 53)

Though such mechanics are meant to be transparent, there is a willing suspension of disbelief by the players. They know that the system is there; the simple act of creating characters means they're aware of it. The same goes for game locations. The *Cthulhu Live* book states that an ideal game session lasts one evening, and can take place in a single location. By changing scenery, sectioning off the large area into smaller ones, or making rooms into different destinations, a game can occur in a single session while still allowing for multiple settings (if stage dramas can play with the unities, why not a LARP?).

Finally, *Cthulhu Live* stresses the importance of the social aspect of LARPs. One aspect of this is the suggested post-game celebration. It can be a party, a night at a local restaurant, or anything that allows players, NPCs, and the keeper the chance to be social without having to be in character. It also allows everyone to cement memorable moments, what-ifs, and characters that have shuffled off this mortal coil (or into the asylum). It also provides a chance just to get to know players better, making it more likely that they will have fun, continue playing, and possibly recruit others. Because *Cthulhu Live* can involve a large number of people, it is always beneficial to have a lot of options:

It's important to build a large gaming group. Make sure you have several members that can do the job of the Keeper, and try to

maintain a dozen or more gamers from which to draw players and
 NPCs. Always try to recruit more players. New faces and ideas
 keep the game fresh and constantly changing. (McLaughlin 1st 7)

Since its first publication in 1997, *Cthulhu Live* has switched publishers and revised its rules, due to years of play-testing.¹⁵ After the second edition, McLaughlin and his play group released additional books through Fantasy Flight Games. The primary book of these add-ons, the *Player's Companion*, provides resources and tips for more advanced LARPers, including prop and costume construction. Others exist to flesh out the imaginary-entertainment environment, such as the *Cthulhu Live: Delta Green* book, which adds the aforementioned modern-day, X-Files style of Cthulhu gaming to this LARP.

As the description of *Cthulhu Live* comes to a close, there are a couple of things to keep in mind for the last two chapters. Though LARPs are not traditional theatre, and gamers often stress that role-playing is not the same as acting on a stage, there are intersections. At the structural level, a LARP shares many elements with theatrical formats. The process of game-writing is termed “scripting.” The support staff is led by a Keeper (director) and a Stage Manager. McLaughlin directly describes *Cthulhu Live* sessions as “a form of interactive, improvisational theater” (2nd 8). And, besides the regular avenues of recruiting players at gaming events and clubs, McLaughlin offers this advice:

Don't forget contacting or leaving flyers at local little theatre
 groups, as well as college and high school drama departments.
 While *Cthulhu Live* is a role-playing game, remember that it [is]
 also a piece of improvisational theater. Speak to the local theater

¹⁵ Though two editions have been printed, McLaughlin is currently working on a third edition of the *Cthulhu Live* book. It is slated to come out in the fall of 2006.

director or drama instructor about what the game has to offer.

Cthulhu Live is a wonderful exercise in acting, improvisation, live performance, prop design, and set construction. Some drama groups may enjoy hosting sessions of *Cthulhu Live* as a special event and fun exercise for their actors and technical staff. (108)

In this one paragraph, we can see the game being positioned as having pedagogical benefits, yet as still primarily something that is a fun “break” from the requirements of theatre classes.

The other thing to keep in mind is a short section in *Cthulhu Live* that describes an alternate means of handling sanity in this LARP. It addresses a gaming style that keeps the idea of sanity, but completely eliminates the Sanity Test: “If the support staff presents a convincing game with shocks, surprises and well-crafted scenes of terror, many players almost “feel” the sanity loss their characters would experience and role-play their reactions appropriately. This option has had best results with experienced Cthulhu gamers or conventional horror adventures” (McLaughlin 2nd 115). This explanation is an echo that precedes the original; this is nearly identical to how Andrew Leman and Sean Branney describe their LARP, *CTHULHU LIVES*. And its inclusion in this book is not surprising; much of the non-system content in the first edition of *Cthulhu Live* came from this other LARP. This reinforces the idea that *Cthulhu Live* is but one example of how a group can transform an existing tabletop RPG into a LARP. But it is not the only way. For that, we now turn to the focus of this study, the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society, and its game, *CTHULHU LIVES*.

4. CTHULHU LIVES!

“It is not entirely coincidental that the live-action role-playing game CTHULHU LIVES was created by theatre students, nor that many of the people who enjoy the game most are interested in theatre. It is not an accident that the single word ‘play’ describes not only what happens in a game, but also what happens on a stage in a theater. CTHULHU LIVES is a fundamentally theatrical experience.”

Andrew Leman, “Theatrical Techniques in CTHULHU LIVES,” *Strange Eons*

This is the story of a game that transformed into something more. In 1984, a group of high school seniors decided to take their hobby to a new level. Sean Branney had been running a new RPG, *Call of Cthulhu*, with his friends. One of these friends was Andrew Leman, a fellow theatre student Branney had met while doing a play. “Knowing the power of real physical roleplaying, one day they discussed how much fun it would be to play a live-action version of their favorite game. They decided then and there to give it a try” (Branney and Leman 19). Such a thought was not yet a common practice; this was still during the early days of RPGs, before the Internet, and before there was the acronym LARP. “[W]hen we started doing it... the Society for Creative Anachronism was probably the closest thing, and that still wasn’t really story-driven. And when we were doing it, the notion of live-action role-playing was, you know, something you really had to take time to explain to people” (Branney, Personal interview). In July of 1984, the two young men teamed up with a third friend to try this experiment in blending performance and gaming. “Sean would write the first game with his friend Darrell Tutchton, and Andrew would organize the players. They decided to call their live-action version *CTHULHU LIVES*. That’s how it all got started” (Branney and Leman 19). Branney and Tutchton acted as keepers for the first game, “The Randolph Mortimer Incident.” The plot was basic and very much in the vein of *Call of Cthulhu*: the investigators followed the trail of a nefarious sorcerer, rescued a potential victim during the climactic ritual, and finally defeated the evil Randolph Mortimer. What was remarkable about the game was not necessarily the plot, but the staging and live-action aspect of

this experiment. “Playing this first game in the live-action style was a revelation to many of the people involved” (HPLHS, Game #1). Among the actual chasing, the physical clues, and some of the more carefully staged locations, the players enjoyed a horror gaming experience full of adrenaline, fright, and fun.

This first game of *CTHULHU LIVES* was a success, if the eager game-playing that followed was any indication. “And that was really fun, and quickly followed by a second, third, fourth, and pretty soon it’s forty, and then fifty, and then sixty” (Branney, Personal interview). Eventually, this first experiment would lead to not only more than sixty games of *CTHULHU LIVES*, but also (at the time of this writing) three films, a full-length stage musical, lectures at gaming and Lovecraft conventions, a physical archive of props and media, an online archive of article and stories, a hobby that has become a self-sustaining entity, and an organization well-respected in the Lovecraft and gaming communities, the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society (HPLHS). How did such a random and leisurely experiment end up as a self-sustaining endeavor? That is what these final chapters seek to answer.

Before turning to an in-depth look at the actual LARP of *CTHULHU LIVES*, there are a few things to keep in mind. There was no widely-known or accessible model for how to create or run a LARP. As Branney mentioned, the closest thing was the SCA, which was still not a story-driven activity. Also of consideration is the timing of this game’s creation. Though other groups were experimenting with live-action games around the same time, “this was also all before the Internet, so we didn’t know that other people existed who had ever thought of this before. There’s no way to know that other people were doing this” (Leman, Personal interview). In this setting, the first *CTHULHU LIVES* participants created a LARP based on the exact same starting point as McLaughlin’s *Cthulhu Live*, the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG. The game would quickly evolve

into a unique form that, though it shares elements of later traditional LARPs and *laiv* plays, is its own singular entity. “[It’s] a unique style of live-action role-playing. ‘Cause even though a lot of people do it now, I still have yet to really meet anybody who... does our approach to it” (Branney, Personal interview). Twenty years after its creation, *CTHULHU LIVES* is still a game that holds a unique place in the gaming community.

The Game: *CTHULHU LIVES*

In 1995, Leman and Branney penned an article for *The Unspeakable Oath*.¹ It was simply titled, “What is *CTHULHU LIVES*?” In it, the two offered this explanation of the game’s system:

CTHULHU LIVES is a blend between the notions of free-form make-believe and the carefully planned excitement of roleplaying games. An outgrowth of Chaosium’s *C[all] o[f] C[thulhu]*, *CTHULHU LIVES* allows players to actually be investigators probing into strange dark mysteries. Rather than sitting around a table **discussing** breathtaking adventures and sanity-wrenching terrors, *CTHULHU LIVES* players actually **experience** them, or, at least, convincingly realistic simulations of them. (Branney and Leman 18-9)

The basic similarities between this game and traditional LARPs are apparent. First and foremost, *CTHULHU LIVES* is based on an existing tabletop RPG. The participants’ roles are defined by the same game terms (keepers, investigators, NPCs). And it is a plot-driven game, with investigators encountering the “dark mysteries” the keeper has in store for them.

¹ *The Unspeakable Oath* is a gaming magazine dedicated to *Call of Cthulhu*, Lovecraft, and the supernatural and horror genres. Produced by Pagan Publishing (a publisher of games, magazines, and other Cthulhu-based items), it was the premiere *Call of Cthulhu* periodical up until the early 2000s. When Pagan was brought low by economic factors in the gaming industry, the *Oath* went on hiatus.

But differences come quickly into focus. Comparing *CTHULHU LIVES* to the other games in this study, we can see how these differences are important and make this game unique. One of the more subtle differences is the role of the keeper. Certainly, the basic job of the keeper is the same in *CTHULHU LIVES* as in other RPGs or LARPs: “The give and take between the NPCs and the Investigators can never be completely predicted. It creates a balance of power; the Investigators must respond to the Keeper and the Keeper must respond to the Investigators” (Branney and Leman 22). But in *CTHULHU LIVES*, the keepers are not just directors and scriptwriters, but producers as well. Though this could be used to describe any GM in a LARP, it is an especially important attribute for *CTHULHU LIVES* keepers. As will be seen when discussing the process of the game, the keepers are in charge of scripting the scenarios, scouting locations, recruiting participants, the monstrous amount of preparation, and that is before they get around to running the game. Just as *Cthulhu Live* developed the role of a stage manager in its second edition, games of *CTHULHU LIVES* often warrant multiple keepers. Not all of them do, but many games benefit from the extra help and creativity that comes with a second keeper. Once the mountain of prep-work is done, and the schedules set, and the participants are in place, the keeper then becomes a “shadowy figure in the background keeping a watchful eye on things.” Though he is around for the important scenes, there are times when investigators might split up, or go off on their own to piece together clues, or otherwise inhabit a spot where there may or may not be NPCs, but no keeper. Even then, the keepers must be available to anyone and everyone involved:

To handle such situations, the Keeper needs to establish a system for communication between the Investigators and the Keeper. One of the most common is what has been called “Keeper Central,”

which consists mostly of making sure the investigators have the Keeper's phone number, and making sure that there is always someone to answer the phone while the game is in progress. Many times Keepers have turned their answering machines into *CTHULHU LIVES* information clearinghouses. (People not involved in the game have gotten some inexplicably strange recorded greetings.) (Branney and Leman 23)

It is not an uncommon occurrence for the keeper to leave a scene in the hands of NPCs. The keeper often plays at least one NPC,² and all the rest have been thoroughly briefed. Since some scenes in a *CTHULHU LIVES* game take place simultaneously but in different areas, NPCs need to be able to think for themselves without going against the plot. While this usually works out, as we will see later, sometimes the NPCs forget (or are not told) that LARPs are not about “us versus them.” Many times, the NPCs have an additional role in a *CTHULHU LIVES* game, as a *koken*. Similar to stagehands, kokens were an addition that Leman added to his games during his time at graduate school:

I didn't take the class, but Shozo Sato taught a kabuki theatre class at University of Illinois. And I would use the concept of “*kokens*,” which in kabuki theatre are stagehands who are aesthetically invisible. And I love that term, “aesthetically invisible.” They're people who are there, but we're all just going to agree to pretend that we can't see them. And once we have the idea of *kokens*, who traditionally dress in all black, and a hood and everything... Then

² Here is another departure from *Cthulhu Live*. Since the keeper does not have to worry about resolving Success Scores and such, he is free to portray an NPC or manipulate a puppet.

the *kokens* can go and help do special effects and magical, realistic things. And because we're all agreeing that they're aesthetically invisible, you ignore the man behind the curtain, and just concentrate on the wizardry that's happening in front. (Leman, Personal interview)

As shall be seen in the discussion of magic and special effects in *CTHULHU LIVES*, *kokens* serve an important role in games where they are utilized. However, not all games use *kokens*, since they are an aesthetic choice if a keeper wants to use them: “just like making different types of movies or different things appeal to the game writer’s aesthetic... So, they’re among techniques used but not necessarily used by everybody” (Branney, Personal interview). After all this, there are also NPCs that will sometimes work as puppeteers. In *CTHULHU LIVES*, some of the bigger games can have NPC lists that rival the cast size of a Shakespearean play.

The other end of the *CTHULHU LIVES* is the player, still known as an investigator. The difference with the investigator role showcases the differences in this LARP’s system. The traditional means of character description in an RPG (character attributes, skill sets or professions, and tallies) is not used in *CTHULHU LIVES*. Instead, keepers and players work together to create a character that will be a compelling part of a narrative: “Character creation in *CTHULHU LIVES* is all about personality and history, not about skills or abilities” (Leman, Letter). Here is where the game tracks much closer to improvisational theatre or *laiv* plays. The creators did away with quantifiable attributes and skill sets: “It was always a question of you do what you can do. And if you can’t do it, you can’t do it” (Leman, Personal interview). What this meant is that it was very helpful to be a player who could do a lot of things, or create a character who might have a lot of connections. “A game might feature translating documents from ancient

Greek, but if it does, don't count on your skill roll to help you: you have to really know Greek, or find a real person who can really help you" (Branney and Leman 18). There have been a few exceptions to this rule, primarily for concerns of security or property damage. A recurring example is when an investigator is supposed to be a thief or saboteur. Rather than have a player worry about breaking locks (especially to residences that are borrowed), the keepers might give the investigator a set of keys as his "lock-picking kit." In general, however, there are no skill checks to make or percentage abilities to use, even when it might be helpful. In Game #55, "The Epic (Mistress of Nyarlathotep)," investigators needed only one more ingredient to create a mystical drug. Despite the fact that the item was in plain sight on a cluttered shelf, the investigators could not seem to find it: "We don't roll dice in *CTHULHU LIVES*, but if we ever did, the long search for the ingredients to the Miskato time drug would have been a good time to do so. One successful Spot Hidden³ roll could have saved Investigators and Keepers alike five hours of amusing but agonizing frustration" (HPLHS, Game #55). This lack of game mechanics puts more focus on the character interactions and development.

Though the players are not always actors, nor a game scenario a traditional play, these interactions provide opportunities to act and react how a character would. "Staying in character is one of the principal challenges the game offers to its players, and is one of its main sources of fun," Leman wrote in an early article about *CTHULHU LIVES*. His interest concerns how the theatrical techniques of improvisation could help players stay in character, as well as enjoy the scenario. "Improvisations can be outrageous, intense, terrifying, hilarious, or total failures. To do an improvisation, all you need are characters thrust into a situation. And characters thrust into a situation is what you have every time you play a *CTHULHU LIVES* scenario. (Leman,

³ "Spot Hidden" is an important investigator skill that is commonly used in *Call of Cthulhu* games.

“Techniques”). In this way, there is no interpersonal event resolution by rolling “Fast Talk” or “Persuade” skills; all resolution is done through improvisation.

Minimization of event resolution would spell problems with games that rely on conflict, such as most traditional LARPs. For *laiv*-style games, such a system is not necessary, as the scripts focus completely on character interaction and relationship. *CTHULHU LIVES* falls somewhere in between. As evidenced by the event resolution system in McLaughlin’s *Cthulhu Live*, even an investigative LARP based on *Call of Cthulhu* can need conflict resolution. The main response to this probability is addressed in the first part of the *CTHULHU LIVES* process, scripting: “our way of dealing with gunfire is... you write stories that don’t require gunfire” (Leman, Personal interview). This is not to say that there is no combat in *CTHULHU LIVES*; rather, it is minimized to more of a plot device than an important element. Since there is no quantitative system for skills or combat, this means that the game does not rely on tallies such as Hit Points. Despite the lack of tallies, factors of injury, magic, death, and insanity still play a large part in *CTHULHU LIVES* (really, it would not be much of a Lovecraftian game without them). But the creators started handling these things in different ways that lessened the possibility of taking players out of the game and the narrative. Combat and injuries were handled a few different ways. One way was displayed in “The Epic.” During a point when the investigators have been transported back to medieval France, a few of the investigators take part in a larger skirmish. “The medieval weaponry was all rigged to be safe to play with. Swords were made of plastic pipe covered with foam rubber. Arrows were tipped with foam rubber pads. Knives and quarterstaves were all plastic or padded rattan” (HPLHS, Game #55). In addition, assistance and NPCs were recruited from practiced combatants, including members of the local Society for Creative Anachronism.

Somewhat more common was the use of guns in *CTHULHU LIVES*. “In the first few games, there was gunplay. And we tried cap guns, we tried squirt guns, we tried various kinds of guns” (Leman, Personal interview). Instead, combat and gunplay became “more in the vein of ‘cowboys & Indians,’ or something that’s just plain sensible play. And go, you know, ‘I shot you.’ And you go, ‘Oh, I got shot,’ so I fall over and I’m dead” (Branney, Personal interview). This approach to combat can be a double-edged sword, to use an anachronistic pun. On the plus side, it can provide an interesting and rewarding experience, such as the oft-mentioned “The Epic.” Near the end of the game, time-traveling investigators (from the 1920s) have become desensitized by 1990s culture and the need to save the world. Needing certain components to be able to confront the antagonist, some of these investigators went to great lengths to attain them. One such was an improvised hold-up of a pawn shop, which resulted in a strange juxtaposition:

The most amazing moment of the pawn shop scenario was when [the character of] Mary Patterson shot and killed a helpless shop employee. In real life, [her player] is a gentle pacifist-vegetarian-liberal. You can’t imagine a less likely person to turn into a bloodthirsty Rambette. It was hilarious to see the fire in her eyes when she got that semiautomatic weapon in her hand. She had a ball. It was a kind of character development that would be very hard to achieve in a less intense style of role-playing. (HPLHS Game #55)

But this style can also cause problems when NPCs forget that they are not competing against players. In a later game of *CTHULHU LIVES* (#57, “Dirt”), the character of Nina was an antagonist who was shot by an NPC at the climax. Her player, unfortunately, “further complicated matters

by only ‘pretending’ to be dead after she was shot: a tenuous position at best, given the imaginary nature of the entire proceeding.” Nina then wrangles up a hostage, and attempts to have another climax during the intended dénouement. When this post-climactic confusion occurred, the people running the game ended it very simply: “Nina gets shot again, this time by the Keepers” (HPLHS, Game #57).⁴ Combat in *CTHULHU LIVES* is not meant to be a skill that an investigator can possess and improve upon; it is meant to be something that rarely happens in plot, often with dangerous consequences for investigators.

Magic is also a dangerous entity that is handled differently in *CTHULHU LIVES*. Without points and quantifiable skills, magical spells have a less rigidly-defined quality than in *Call of Cthulhu* or *Cthulhu Live*. For more ritualistic spells, such as to open up a time portal or raise the dead, the process is about committal to character and game, as well as following directions:

Usually, when we have a spell that the players are supposed to throw, they usually find a grimoire or something that very clearly lists, “this is how you do the spell.” So it’s up to them to learn how to do it properly, and to assemble whatever magical items or ingredients they need to get it up. And then it’s up to them to follow instructions. (Leman, Personal interview)

Since such spells are integral to the plot, if the players have done things properly, it succeeds. There’s no dice, no hiccups in narrative. However, not all such spells are integral to a plot. An example of this is at the end of “The Epic.” An investigator, Patrick O’Connell, ended up dead after the climactic fight with the antagonist. A grimoire that was in the hand of another

⁴ Though I pointed out (in chapter two) that Mackay was fascinated by the power wielded by a keeper in these games, this example serves as how checks-and-balances work in RPGs and LARPs. Just as players can sink a keeper by no longer playing, a keeper has options when and if a player tries to take over the game. It is extremely rare, however, that a keeper would need to do this.

investigator, Philip Grimm, had been used by players earlier in the game. Grimm had sacrificed his sanity and personal well-being in order to use the blasphemous contents contained within. To create a more believable prop, the keepers had included a number of other spells, including a Resurrection spell. “The Keepers... didn’t anticipate that Grimm would try to resurrect him using a spell from the *Necronomicon*. But it seemed only fair to let it work: the Investigators had been through a great deal, and Grimm had paid the price for his occult knowledge” (HPLHS, Game #55). In addition, keepers will find creative ways of simulating such rituals’ effects. *Kokens* carrying or restraining players, fireworks and smoke, or even elaborate props (such as the time portal) can provide effective magical results.

The other type of spellcasting in *CTHULHU LIVES* is the more offensive type, akin to a weapon. This type can be simulated with objects such as beanbags (or anything soft, unobtrusive, safe, and throwable). If a player’s character can “throw ‘rays of paralysis’ or something, you throw a beanbag; if you hit them with the beanbag, they’re paralyzed” (Leman, Personal interview). The other way of simulating offensive spells is through the use of code words. Similar to the way players use skills in the *World of Darkness* LARPs (described in chapter two), *CTHULHU LIVES* occasionally employs code words to indicate what has happened:

We’ll say to a player, “Okay, this game involves code words; if you hear the word ‘popsicle,’ freeze in your tracks. If you hear the word ‘crocodile,’ you grow mute with fear.” And we usually give them three or four code words, at least two of which are totally bogus; they’re never going to be used. ‘Cause we don’t want to tip them off to what might be coming up... And so they’ll be in the middle of having dinner with Aleister Crowley, at a restaurant, and

he'll say something like, "Oh, it'd be nice to have dessert. I wonder if they have *popsicles*." And all of a sudden everybody freezes. (Leman, Personal interview)

Code words can be used not only for magic, but also to recreate fantastical or dangerous events. This was the case in game #18, "The Horror in Egypt," when the players were given the following words:

"Fishbone:" you are attacked by an alligator

"Crankshaft:" you feel increasingly ill, skin turns yellow, etc.

"Dog meat:" you are bitten by a snake

"Riverboat:" you feel your brain bubbling, agony, meeping, etc.

"Yeeeeeeg:" something nearby is never seen again

In this game, the only code word that came into play was the last one. It was said by an NPC named Richard who yelled it prior to going under water. "Even though Sean Branney, who was playing him, resurfaced to breathe, the players understood that Richard never came up from the water again" (HPLHS, Game #18). This use of words allows for magical and deadly effects to occur without any need for actual paranormal skill or risk of death.

More than death or magic, the signature idea of any game with "Cthulhu" in the title is sanity, or the lack thereof. Again, due to the lack of a quantitative system, sanity is a little harder to define in *CTHULHU LIVES*, though its presence is felt. As the creators describe it, "Although sanity is a major issue in *C[all] o[ff] C[thulhu]*, its impact is perhaps more subtle in *CTHULHU LIVES*" (Branney and Leman 22). One way to introduce this aspect of the game is very simple. If the storyline would seem to benefit from a little insanity, a keeper might ask a player to play it

up. Both Leman and Branney point out that you can't "force" a player to go insane, though. Instead, "in some specific cases,⁵ you say, 'we'd really like you to go a little insane here.' And you just leave it up to the player to do what they've been doing" (Leman, Personal interview). An example of the effectiveness of this tactic can be found in "The Horror in Egypt." This scenario was a full immersion game, meaning that players woke up, ate, and slept as their characters. The investigators were in a trailer in the middle of a desert after a hellish and frightening day. The keepers had instructed a player to "wake up" shortly after everyone bedded down, screaming, because of a specific nightmare. The player actually fell asleep, but woke up a few hours later, when everyone was dead asleep, and decided to enact the scene then. The effects of this sanity-draining nightmare were multiplied, as Leman (a fellow player in the scenario) explained:

It's three in the morning; the guy next to me is screaming. I was literally paralyzed. I was so frightened, I could not move. There was a gun under my pillow; I couldn't reach for it, I was literally paralyzed. So it ended up working out even better than they had hoped. Because when he did wake up and scream, everyone was so asleep that it was so shocking... And it was the sort of thing where it's like, "Okay, I just lost five Sanity points." And I know it. I can't move, I'm so frightened, that cost me sanity, I know it.

(Leman, Personal interview)

Another way of introducing sanity into a *CTHULHU LIVES* game is when a player decides that his or her character would go insane from in-game experiences. Such was the case in "The Epic,"

⁵ In these cases, such a request would be due to what has happened in the plot, or something an individual investigator experienced. Remember, though, it is ultimately the player who makes the choice of what his level of "sanity loss" might be, and how his character would react.

when a investigator, whose life had been turned upside down, starting reading the most sanity-warping of forbidden Lovecraftian tomes, the *Necronomicon*. Figuring his character would be a little unhinged by everything, the player began acting weirder, and even going so far as putting white stuff in his hair to simulate the mental trauma the investigator was going through. “It was a great example of a player running with the storyline, and making the experience richer for everyone else” (Leman, Personal interview). This kind of sanity loss relies on player performance, as opposed to keeper preparation.

But the most common “sanity losses” are those that are set up to happen, but not guaranteed. The most primal and basic results when the keepers are able to construct the scene and the narrative in a way that an investigator is shocked, where a player can say, “I physically felt what I judged to be about 10 *C[all] o[f] C[thulhu]* sanity points leave my body” (HPLHS, Game #1). There are many example of this type of scare in a horror LARP such as *CTHULHU LIVES*. The previous quotation, for instance, was from the very first game of *CTHULHU LIVES*. Leman was referring to a scene where he and his fellow investigators found a hidden room. Unfortunately, they couldn’t see into it, because the light bulb appeared to be blown:

We speculated that perhaps the bulb was burned out, and someone got a replacement bulb from Mr. Copper. Getting a boost from a chair, I crawled through the hole, then asked one of my companions, Mark Drudge, to hand me a flashlight. The floor of the space was dirt, at an irregular slope, and there were cobwebs falling into my face. I crawled my way over to the dangling light bulb and reached up to begin unscrewing it, so I could replace it. But the moment I touched it, it flickered on. Startled, I let go of the

bulb, and it immediately went dark again. I realized that it was just not tightly screwed into the socket, and called out to my companions, “It’s just unscrewed,” looking back at them over my shoulder. I turned again to look at the light bulb, and screwed it firmly into place. Just as I did so, and the light came on to stay, I turned and looked down. There, just a few feet in front of me, was the hideous, melted corpse of a man, suddenly revealed in the glow from the bulb that was still clutched in my fingers. (HPLHS, Game #1)

This scene was a perfect sanity-drainer not only because of the scare, or because it was so carefully set up and staged, but because it meant the player was the one who scared himself. “I did it to myself, you know? It was all me crawling in and doing the thing, and... It was flawless, and it worked so perfectly, and I literally felt myself go a little crazy” (Leman, Personal interview). This type of “sanity loss” is something not quantitative, but rather stems from a scare that is part of a horror experience.⁶

This “more natural” means of insanity is less defined than the tabletop system, and bleeds over into other emotional reactions. Such experiences can be incurred not only by careful staging, but also by the mood, environment, or emotional experiences of the players. The *CTHULHU LIVES* game “Perigo” demonstrated how environmental factors can create this, while “The Ninth Talisman” demonstrated how emotional experiences can factor into “sanity loss.” In the former, the keepers had scouted ghost towns near the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. Finding one to their liking, they prepared the scenario and ran it. As the investigators went deeper into

⁶ And here is a good time to look back at the alternate ways of handling sanity that *Cthulhu Live* described. The use of similar language, including the verb “to feel,” hints that McLaughlin was primarily referring to the *CTHULHU LIVES* style of sanity loss in his book.

the plot, they uncovered more and more disturbing information. In this environment, the investigators were scared enough, “that the only sane thing to do was flee.” As Sean Branney, who was one of the keepers, describes the players’ reaction:

[B]y the time night set in, they’re starting to read some of these documents and journals and stuff they had found, around bonfires, on top of a mountain in Colorado at night. And once they realized what had happened... everybody fled. And that was the end of the game. (Branney, Personal interview)

Andrew Leman, who was a player in that game, reinforces the idea of how the specific environment contributed the “sanity losses” and fleeing. In a ghost town littered with open and abandoned mine shafts, there was a frightening atmosphere. Having to interact with this scenery is what finally caused the ending:

[T]hese insane lunatics [the keepers] hid a human skeleton dressed in rags, clutching a moldy old journal, a hundred yards inside this horizontal mine shaft, that we had to spelunk our way into. It was pitch black. The floor of this tunnel was covered—I remember it being about waist high, maybe even higher—in the coldest water imaginable... It was so cold, and so dark, and you could feel the old rusted railroad tracks beneath you... And you finally get there, there’s the human skeleton clutching the book. And, like, you’re really there... It’s like, “Okay, this is scary!” (Leman, Personal interview)

In the game, “The Ninth Talisman,” the investigators stumble upon a decades-old curse, and one cultist’s attempt to escape it. To do so, this antagonist had ritually killed a woman and buried talismans around her, so her spirit could not seek vengeance.⁷ The investigators exhumed the body, thereby releasing the dead woman’s ghost. To their amazement and horror, they also found the body of her infant, also murdered, buried with the ninth and final talisman; this released the ghost of the infant. At the climax, the apparition of the infant transformed into the vengeful specter of Death. Using a specially-crafted puppet, “a normal-size infant seemed to transform into an 8-ft. tall ghost in just a few moments” (HPLHS, Game #44). Though this game might seem like a vengeance ghost drama in a similar vein as *Macbeth* or *The Spanish Tragedy*, or a Japanese Noh play, the real emotional experience come from the exhilaration, revulsion, and insanity felt during game play. A female player explained it thusly:

My recollections of that game seem to be just off in my peripheral vision: when I turn my focus to look directly at them, they fade out. I have no clear idea how we came to any of the conclusions in the game. What I do remember with immediacy is fighting off encroaching panic as we navigated our way through living woods in a tight little bunch, and the starburst of adrenaline shooting out of my heart at the first sight of the baby’s corpse, and the unlooked-for, unexpected tenderness and care I grew to feel toward the baby as I held him—there was a point at which I think I wouldn’t have been surprised if that baby had cooed and cuddled

⁷ In order to bind the victim’s spirit to the ground, the antagonist had constructed an occult sigil over where she was buried. At each of the nine points, he buried a stone talisman in the ground; as long as these talismans remained undisturbed, the vengeful spirit could not escape. The investigators dug up each talisman. The ninth talisman was not buried alone, but in a steel box with the (prop) corpse of the victim’s infant son.

and cried. This game was clearly a mostly emotional experience for me, much less so a rational or tactical one. (HPLHS, Game #44)

It is one thing to watch a play about a ghost pleading for revenge; it is another to be a player to whom the ghost has unexpectedly turned for assistance.

All of these elements are what make up the *CTHULHU LIVES* experience. But they do not happen in a vacuum; it takes an enormous amount of preparation and coordination to get a single game underway. For starters, games are rarely done in a single setting, in terms of both sessions and locations. “Most of the *CTHULHU LIVES* games are played in what we call ‘scenarios’... The typical game consists of several separate scenarios that are played independently of each other” (Leman, Personal interview). Whereas most traditional LARPs will have sessions in a single outing during a given block of time, *CTHULHU LIVES* games are rarely so contained. The reason most LARPs will have single sessions in a single location is a matter of logistics; not only can it be difficult to coordinate player schedules, but there is also the coordination of playing spaces. Since traditional LARPs use a single area to denote various locales, it is often recommended that games last one session. *CTHULHU LIVES* takes a different approach:

Ours... tends to move physical locations, scenario-to-scenario. So you get to the creepy graveyard and meet the gravedigger. And from him you learn that you need to go up the mountain and look behind the rock, and you find the thing that leads you to the warehouse and the fish market. So, you’re actually physically going from place to place. (Branney, Personal interview)

With few exceptions (such as a handful of one-scenario games, or a handful of total-immersion games), a *CTHULHU LIVES* game will take place over a few weeks to a few months, in an average of three or four scenarios. Some of the exceptions, the total immersion games, seem similar in structure to the *laiv* plays: “you’re literally playing twenty-four hours a day. You’re sleeping in character, you wake up in character, and you’re just totally immersed in the world of the game for, like, a week” (Leman, Personal interview). Out of the more than sixty games of *CTHULHU LIVES* played, less than a half-dozen have been total immersion. In general, they take the shape of a multiple scenario, multiple location game. Though this provides a unique and exciting gaming experience, we shall see later in the chapter how this can also severely limit the quantity of games played.

All these elements result in a game preparation that “is a painstaking process” (Branney and Leman 20). The initial step is to create a game’s plot. Like most other LARPs, keepers need to take into account and script a number of different things, some of which may never see the light of day: “Writing for live gaming is unlike writing for anything else. Because it has to be written, yet what you write down doesn’t mean squat” (Branney, Personal interview). But the script needs to be more than a checklist of linear steps the investigators must go through. Branney expounds upon the considerations that go into a *CTHULHU LIVES* game:

I like to think of movie scripts and plays and dramatic writing in terms of subjective and objective stories. The objective one’s the plot: what happens, what’s unfolding. “Oh, there’s a big battle.” But the subjective one is, all right, what is going on, emotionally, for our protagonists. “Oh, he’s battling the loss of the family farm,” or, “He’s going through what he’s going through; and at the

same time, the Nazi brigade of Panzer tanks is coming.” And, boom, when those two meet, that’s the climax of the movie... Over time, we’ve realized that, in the perfect world, it’s a balance of both. (Personal interview)

After the overarching plot is written, it must be broken down into individual scenarios.

Throughout this scripting process, in the back of the keepers’ minds, it also is important to realize the limitations and needs of the final script.

Once the script is finalized, then those limitations and needs become realities. A keeper needs to make sure that he can “create all of the clues and pieces of physical evidence which the Investigators will need to propel them from one scenario to the next” (Branney and Leman 20). Since *CTHULHU LIVES* is based off investigation, these props also need to be carefully implemented into the script. A random happenstance from “The Epic” points this out. When a location was switched, a clue that was supposed to be hidden in a fireplace pit was hidden elsewhere in the new location:

We discovered later that, by coincidence, it turned out that the place used as the new location had a fireplace with a similar pit. There was also a cat in the house which, for reasons we never could figure out, kept staring suspiciously into the fireplace. The Investigators, being extremely paranoid, decided that the cat was trying to tell them something, and searched the pit below the fireplace. It was luck of the Keeper that the *Necronomicon* was not in fact hidden there, or it would have been found far too soon and the plot would have been derailed. (HPLHS, Game #55)

Players are always on the lookout for anything that might be a hint. Clues also have to be carefully planned. Keepers will also need to construct any special elements that are necessary for the game. Using “The Epic” for another example, the antagonist traveled through time portals. The keepers could have come up with any number of pedestrian ways of re-enacting this, but went instead for something more physical and spectacular:

The portal itself was an extremely simple device: essentially just a giant black fabric tube with a lightweight plastic pipe collapsible framework at the opening. The special effects were created with a few CO2 fire extinguishers and an electronic camera flash unit. Shiny silver fabric lining part of the inside of the tube was designed to enhance the flashes. The investigators landed on two huge pole vaulting mats, stacked one on top of the other... The whole thing was operated by about ten *kokens* dressed entirely in black, and the players reported later that in their excitement they really didn’t see any of them. As far as they were concerned, it really was just a big hole in space with lightning and fog. (HPLHS, Game #55)

As will be explored later in this study, such carefully-constructed, three-dimensional devices can up the level of engagement in a scenario.

Of course, these props are useless without locations. After all, you cannot have players leap off a roof into a time portal if you do not have access to a multiple-story building. As has been mentioned, *CTHULHU LIVES* breaks away from traditional LARPs in its use of location. If the script calls for a desert, the scenario needs to take place in a desert. If investigators need to

see a formation in the sand, there must be a physical means of getting the players high enough above said formation for full visual impact.⁸ It is the job of the keepers to find, gain permission to use, and secure locations for every scenario. Not only that, but “the Keeper bears the vital responsibility of ensuring legality and safety for all of the participants as well as innocent bystanders of a scenario” (Branney and Leman 21). As Branney attests to, nothing can screw up a game like not warning the proper authorities: “scaring people who aren’t involved in the game is always a big concern. There have been three or four occasions.... We had a scenario in a public place, and someone became alarmed, and police were called, and they’ve always worked out, but...” (Branney, Personal interview). As much fun as *CTHULHU LIVES* might be, it is so because everybody involved knows it is a game. The potential danger comes from anyone who might not know it is a game; there are, after all, themes of occultism, the supernatural, horror, zombies, and the rare fight. Hence, legality and safety must be ensured. All this is done at the same time as recruiting participants in the game scenarios.

Once the creation aspect of the keepers’ job has been completed, the next tasks turn to managing human resources. “Finding the right person for the job [is important]: I need a musician and I need a dancer, I need a lighting guy, I need some actors... And finding them, getting them together, letting them know what to do” (Branney, Personal interview). NPCs and *kokens* come into play at this time. “The Keeper needs to brief the NPCs very thoroughly, discussing the characters, plot and anticipated turn of events, and giving them some ideas for what to do in the likely event that things don’t go as planned” (Branney and Leman 21). It is at this time that a keeper must make sure everyone understands the narrative and nature of *CTHULHU LIVES*. Since *kokens*, puppeteers, and NPCs might be waiting around in unpleasant

⁸ In the game of “Mose Ain’t Dead,” this was achieved by in a helicopter, “flying from the Van Nuys airport to a spot 100 miles away in the Mojave Desert” (HPLHS, Game #64).

conditions, it is essential that this support staff knows what the basic plot will be, and trusts that the keepers will do everything possible to make sure they are not put into an uncomfortable situation for an unsafe period of time.⁹ Around the same timeframe as when these participants are being briefed, the keeper will work with players to create characters, sometimes guiding them in a certain direction, other times working whatever the player desires for his character into the script. At this point, the keepers must coordinate everyone's schedules and locations, and make sure to inform all participants of these.

On the day of the first scenario, the players arrive in character, and the keeper sets the scene and lets the game go. This introduction can be very simple, such as an NPC showing up with the gathering investigators and giving them a motivation. Or, as evidenced by "The Epic," it can be a complex test of the keeper's ability as a game's producer:

This one, there were, like, three players who started the game, started the story for different reasons, had different motives...

Basically, we had to start the game three different times, 'cause we need to start it for each set of players, individually... And they only, finally, actually end up in the same room at the same time by two or three scenarios into the game. (Leman, Personal interview)

But the multitasking and producing does not end there. As is the case with most LARPs, the best keepers are the ones who can take what the players are doing and work it into the story and alter the plot to fit the participants' actions. If a player is going insane, and the keepers did not plan for it, they need to adapt. "And they'll change the storyline to accommodate the fact he's now

⁹ For example, due to confusion during the final scenario for "Dirt," one of the keepers (Andrew Leman) and an NPC were in a barn for longer than expected on a November night. The NPC was "wearing little more than a burlap sack, nearly froze, and Andrew's puppet hand was almost completely numb from being over his head for so long" (HPLHS, Game #55).

crazy. And that's where it gets into, you know... We're all creating the story simultan— mutually. It's not a question of storytelling, it's a question of story creation" (Leman, Personal interview). Since the games are exercises of mutual creation, it is not merely the keepers who need to improvise, but the players as well. And this creation is also happening simultaneously. This means that said creation is not a planned-out collaboration; it is a story that takes shape through real-time improvisation. No matter what happens with the story, all participants must work to keep up the collective fantasy, keep buying into their characters and the events around them. The improvisational rule of "don't deny" is important to keeping up this shared fantasy, this *folie à deux*. When a hastily-constructed puppet of Nodens, made from chicken wire, muslin, and lumber, shows up, the LARP experience would begin to crumble if a player pointed out a perceived flaw in the design. And since keepers have to react to the players, not everything goes to plan; this does not mean the game falls apart: "Despite the most careful planning in the world, *CTHULHU LIVES* games are one-shot, spontaneous creations, mutually constructed by all participants. Things invariably go wrong: some things work better than planned, others fail miserably. Players have learned to roll with the punches." The keepers, NPCs, and *kokens* are especially important in keeping this story creation going, as well as contributing to a safe environment where everyone can experiment and play. "Familiarity, trust and respect between all players are key elements of success" (Branney and Leman 22). Possibly the most impressive of this sense of familiarity and trust can be found in "The Epic," during the first unveiling of the time portal. As was previously mentioned, this massive prop of cloth, PVC, smoke, and flash bulbs opened up. And it did so on the side of the building where all the players were. The antagonist was on the roof:

And so... all of a sudden there was this huge gaping hole that she could jump into. And the first time it appeared, she jumped, literally, off a roof into the time portal and just fell and vanished into a cloud of smoke... after she jumped through, the time portal was still there, so [the investigators] were given [a choice], you know, “Do we jump in after, or do we stay here?” And God bless them, they all decided to jump through, not knowing what they would be landing on, but feeling confident that we wouldn’t let them hit the gravel and hurt themselves. So, yeah, they jumped off a roof, blind, into a maelstrom of smoke and lightning. (Leman, Personal interview)

Only when a keeper can earn the trust of players are events like this possible. Under normal, everyday circumstances, a person would not jump off a roof into a prop time portal. They would most likely consider it an insane proposition. But, in a game setting, where the keepers have earned the players’ trust, that insane option is now a likely choice. The investigators, properly motivated, would jump in; the players, knowing the keeper would never ask them to do something exceedingly dangerous, can jump in.¹⁰

After the investigators have finished the last scenario of a game, the *CTHULHU LIVES* experience is not quite finished:

At the end of every game, usually immediately following the final scenario, when the Investigators are flushed with victory (or defeat) and the NPCs are covered in mud, or blood or slime or

¹⁰ This brings up an interesting ethical quandary, not covered in the scope of this study: where is the line between trust fall versus unrehearsed and untrained stunt?

something, all the players and the Keeper have a postmortem debriefing. This usually takes place at a Denny's or similar restaurant (chocolate shakes and onion rings are the traditional victory snack). (Branney and Leman 24)

This post-game event, as mentioned in the *Cthulhu Live* handbook, is just as important as *CTHULHU LIVES*. As the *Call of Cthulhu* rulebook stated, part of the joy in horror role-playing is the relief after the scare. This debriefing allows for that relief, that dénouement. Sean Branney describes the post-game wind-down as “a very traditional part... Some games are very physically and emotionally intense... And they need that decompression, shake it off, ‘wow, wasn’t that great? Here, let’s have a milkshake and onion rings’” (Branney, Personal interview). It also allows the keepers to lament about a brilliant clue the investigators missed, or the NPCs laughing about an unexpected turn of events, or for players to relive the scenarios and events as they happened from their own point of view. These are the times for critiques, remembrances, and general camaraderie. But there is also the chance, in the festive environment, to learn and improve. “Besides being enormously fun in their own right, these sessions help refine the gaming skills of Keepers and Investigators alike” (Branney and Leman 24). Much like amateur or collegiate theatrical productions will have a cast party, games such as *CTHULHU LIVES* benefit from having a time to unwind, retell the narratives about their characters, and connect with each other in a fun atmosphere without being in character. It should also bring back the words of anthropologist Victor Turner, briefly mentioned in the second chapter of this study: “No society is without some mode of metacommentary—Geertz’s illuminating phrase for a ‘story a group tells about itself’ or in the case of theatre, a play a society acts about itself—not only a reading of its experience but an interpretive reenactment of its experience” (104). It is at these post-game

sessions where the players, NPCs, and keepers tell each other what they saw and experienced, or let each other know what could of (but did not) happened, or to figure out why people made the decisions they did. It is a liminoid¹¹ experience, as everyone gets to unwind from playing in a character (in liminal gamplay), collating individual thoughts and experiences in a public setting before going back to being themselves (in the normal world).

There, in an imperfect an inherently problematic nutshell, is a *CTHULHU LIVES* game from start to finish. But the problem with trying to describe the “average” game is that the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society has played more than sixty games over a twenty-year span. Not all of them have been successful endeavors. *CTHULHU LIVES*, after all, has been a trial-and-error process; in interviews, Andrew Leman described this mutual story creation as being akin to a “laboratory environment.” An example of a failed game was an early one titled (perhaps retroactively) “The Mystery Keeper,” in which the identity of who was running the game was a secret. Leman described the problems with such a set-up in a *CTHULHU LIVES* game:

First of all, it is completely distracting from the story. With the very real mystery of who is running the game to be considered, no one cares about the events of the plot. Second, and more important, are the safety issues raised. If no one knows who the keeper is, no one knows who to discuss potential danger with, no one knows who to ask questions of, no one knows to whom to appeal in the event of an emergency. (HPLHS, Game #12)

For Sean Branney, there was also the problem caused with the *necessity* to meta-game. “The fun of our type of RPG is stepping into another world to investigate; when the investigation is carried

¹¹ I specifically use Turner’s term, “liminoid,” to describe this process. “*Liminoid phenomena* may be collective (and when they are so, are often directly derived from liminal antecedents) but are more characteristically individual products, though they often have collective or ‘mass’ effects” (54).

out by the players themselves in the real world, it ceases to be a game and becomes a muddle of confusion” (HPLHS, Game #12). The meta-game, as discussed in chapter two, is a tricky part of RPGs and LARPs. In the liminal space of a game session, “ordinary regularities of kinship, the residential setting, tribal law and custom are set aside, where the bizarre becomes the normal, and where through the loosening of connections between elements customarily bound together in certain combinations, their scrambling and recombining in monstrous, fantastic, and unnatural shapes, the novices are induced to think” (V. Turner 42).¹² That is, the meta-game (out-of-game knowledge) is ludic when it is secondary, an experience and a thought in the players’ heads. When the meta-game interferes with gameplay, becomes more than a thought, becomes a necessity, then it becomes problematic. Suddenly, players are snapped back into the real world. They have to meta-game in order to ensure their safety and understanding. By doing that, they are no longer able to engage in the play of liminality. With this idea of liminality, and of trial-and-error in mind, it is important to look at not only what a *CTHULHU LIVES* game entails, but of how the games have developed since the three men conceived the idea in 1984.

The first few games of *CTHULHU LIVES* bear the evidence of their basis on *Call of Cthulhu*. As Branney describes them, they were primarily plot-driven and goal-oriented. “In the beginning, our games tended to be purely objectively-driven: Oh, find the lost artifact of Whoozy-Whatzy and bring it back to the Whatzy-Whatzy and it’s done” (Branney, Personal interview). A number of these games in the first year also involve single-scenario games. It is in these early years that a lot of games were played in a short time. Looking at the HPLHS online archives, there were twelve games played within a twelve-month span, and another six the following year. With such a large number of games in a short time, it makes sense that the

¹² In this quotation, Turner is specifically describing a ritualistic rite of passage. Though it is arguable whether a *CTHULHU LIVES* scenario might be a rite of passage, I believe it an apt description, especially the act of “scrambling and recombining in monstrous, fantastic, and unnatural shapes.”

participants would quickly discover techniques and ideas that worked, and those that did not. But it was not only the technical and systematic kinks that were being worked out; early games show how keepers learned through first-hand experience how to run the game and help shape the narrative. An interesting example of such an experience was in the second *CTHULHU LIVES* game, “The Eye of R’as al Ghethi.” Over the course of the game, the investigators ended up in the climactic moment in a showdown with the antagonist, played by the keeper. And the keeper played true to how the NPC would act. Unfortunately, this meant that the antagonist was personally responsible for the death of all the investigators. It was an ending that was not only unsatisfying from a narrative standpoint, but also from a personal standpoint for the keeper. “He was so upset, in fact, that he said he’d never play *CTHULHU* again” (HPLHS, Game #2). The players convinced him to re-play the ending, with a minor act of *deus ex machina*,¹³ and the result was not only a fun game, but one with a creepy and resonant ending. An example such as this displays not only how *CTHULHU LIVES* never fully went in the direction that *laiv* would, but also why it is a good thing the game did not. In the more naturalistic style of a *laiv* play, a new plot device right at the end would be frowned upon. But *CTHULHU LIVES* developed along the lines of fun; and sometimes a well-written *deus ex machina* is more enjoyable and exhilarating than a more “realistic” ending.

The scripting process also began shifting after the first couple years of games. Already, two games in those years had used a full-immersion style of play, including the aforementioned “The Horror in Egypt.” But this experiment in the level of player immersion was not the only

¹³ In the alternate ending, the antagonist is momentarily distracted when he hears movement in the adjoining room; the room was uninhabited, save for the dead bodies of rival cult members. The investigators use this distraction to disarm the antagonist and kill him. When they go to investigate the noise, they find the room empty. The bodies have disappeared from a room with no visible exits...

way scripts began to look at character experiences. In another game, players were faced with a plot twist: the uncle they had been trying to protect was actually a Judas:

[A]t the end of the game, their uncle in fact was a cultist. And he became the one betraying them, not the cultists themselves... The climax of that story became a huge emotional shock for the players who were so worried about trying to get their uncle saved, and then so pissed off when they learn that this guy was in fact betraying them, and trying to feed them to the monsters. (Branney, Personal interview)

It was a subjective reaction to a bit of objective plot. For Branney, it was one of the first scripts where he began delving into the subjective parts of scripts. This shift in focus on not only what happens in the narrative, but also the characters' experiences and reactions to such happening, has become the hallmark of later *CTHULHU LIVES* scripts. "The interplay between [objective and subjective], that's fascinating" (Leman, Personal interview). The final piece to the evolution of scripting has been the incorporation of continuity and beneficial meta-game aspects.¹⁴ Though games were not necessarily connected to each other in a narrative sense, there were occasional pieces of continuity that built up as more games occurred. "It's kind of like good series television, where, five years into the series, you understand the characters and their own histories so well that you can just use shorthand to tell the story" (Leman, Personal interview). One of the earlier games (from 1988), the last game played by the core group of the HPLHS in Colorado, incorporated a plot based around *CTHULHU LIVES* continuity. The game, "The Master Race," blended not only the Lovecraftian Mythos with pre-WWII era history, but also with the collected

¹⁴ As in, the out-of-game thoughts a player might be experiencing in relation to their character's decisions and experiences. Again, so long as the player is not pulled out of the liminal sphere of gameplay.

memories of previous games. The game centered around the “death” of Wally Forsythe, a long-time character of Andrew Leman’s:

Knowing that it was to be the last Colorado game, and worrying that it might be the last game ever, Keeper Andrew Leman wanted to take the opportunity to look back over the many adventures the group had played. So the plot called for a crate filled with artifacts from the career of long-standing character Wally Forsythe. The crate of Wally’s things was filled with props from many old games, and viewing them was a trip down memory lane not only for the character Charlie Twobears but also for player Sean Branney... To increase the impact of the mementoes in the crate, Andrew created props from some of the paper games as though they had actually been played live. (HPLHS, Game #33)

The game ended with Forsythe being rescued from hopping through times and dimensions, only to accidentally lose a shoe while attempting to escape a rampaging Cthuluid entity. While Forsythe’s death was unintentional, it provided an emotional resonance due to his part in the game’s continuity. When a character has that much background, his death means something more than it might have earlier in the narrative (a fact superhero comics have used and exploited on a consistent basis).

Another example of use of continuity was in the most recent game on American soil, “Mose Ain’t Dead.” In this game, it was not only the in-game continuity of events that made a rich script, but also the continuity of players. Keeper Andrew Leman described the game thusly: “In many ways this game was a sequel to Game 32, ‘The Black Man,’ and is an example of the

kind of richness that *CTHULHU LIVES* can offer as a form of storytelling by operating on at least two levels of reality at the same time” (HPLHS, Game #64). By two levels, Leman refers to the player, Sean Branney, and his character, Harley Warren; Warren had been one of the investigators in “Mose,” and Branney had been the keeper for “The Black Man.” Leman used not only characters from another modern-day *CTHULHU LIVES* game (#62, “The Call,” also one for which Branney acted as keeper), but also the characters and events from the games that took place in the 1920s. Many of the old characters had passed on, though there was a dramatic session where a player stepped into her *CTHULHU LIVES* character, except this time the character had aged seventy years. Since Branney and the investigators were tracking down clues from previous games, it provided ample opportunity to use the “meta-life” of the players:

Sean was playing a character, in the story, who’s investigating a character that he had played in a previous game. So, Sean’s looking at his own past actions through the eyes of this other character... Sean’s going down memory lane, ‘cause he was looking at all these things from previous games, but his character doesn’t know anything about this. So it’s that delicious tension between what Sean’s going through and what his character’s going through. It’s just a lot of fun to mess around. (Leman, Personal interview)

In scripts such as this, it would be akin to Sean Connery appearing in a new Bond film, except this time as a man investigating the early cases of James Bond. While such a comparison is interesting for an audience member, it would be a liminal trip into the meta-life for a player. Since Branney was keeper for the prequels to “Mose Ain’t Dead,” he would know the results,

characters, and details of what happened before. But his character would not. This creates an interplay in the player's mind: he knows what happened, but his character does not. He must look at it through eyes which are familiar, yet unfamiliar. In addition, Branney's character is experiencing these characters for the first time; Branney is revisiting them, though he no longer is in the privileged position of knowing where they are going. Once again, "the loosening of connections between elements customarily bound together in certain combinations, their scrambling and recombining in monstrous, fantastic, and unnatural shapes," causing the player to rethink. As Leman and Branney repeated in their interviews, this kind of unique liminal¹⁵ experience is something that is rare to any other form of entertainment.

The development of *CTHULHU LIVES* has also been one of style. Over the course of two decades, there have been many different keepers; and even among the most prolific ones, personal styles and differences have developed. One of those differences, as was stated earlier, is the use of *kokens*. Developed from Leman's experiences in graduate school, *kokens* were often used in spectacular, blockbuster games that played upon character emotions and physical experiences. On Branney's end, the games took a slightly different style: "Sean did a larger number of smaller games, and I did a smaller number of bigger games." (Leman, Letter). This is not to say that Branney did not utilize spectacle and professional resources, just that he did so in a different way, with Hollywood and theatrical resources at hand. Both keepers have used their increased resources to create more elaborate and spectacular games. The disadvantage in these increasing stakes, however, is that *CTHULHU LIVES* hits a limit. Even a cursory glance at the incomplete HPLHS archives will note that games have slowed in production since those first few years. "In some ways, kind of, *CTHULHU LIVES* has slit its own throat a little bit," is how Branney describes it. "Over time, we've become more ambitious, more complex, more realistic, which

¹⁵ "Liminal" is my adjective, applied to their discussion of the unique meta-life aspect of LARPs.

means it takes more prep, more money, more thought, more time to make them” (Personal interview). The recurring example of “The Epic” illuminates this point. The time-hopping game was an immense combination of props, locations, and subjective plot. By the end of the game, the players were so enamored with the narrative, they wanted more: “The players clamored for a sequel when this game was over, because they felt the story was unresolved. [The keepers] have plans for the continuation of the game, but it will have to wait until they win the lottery, because what they have planned would cost millions of dollars to produce” (HPLHS, Game #55). In addition, Leman and Branney have their own professional and personal lives, which make such elaborate games more difficult to schedule. Along those lines, the non-game activities of the HPLHS (which will be looked at in the next chapter) have caused a waning of gaming activity. When the group musters its resources and skills to create Lovecraftian films (and a musical), there is not enough time for the necessary preparation for a game of *CTHULHU LIVES*.

This is not to say that the game is something of the past. Following the famous Lovecraft line of “that is not dead which can eternal lie,”¹⁶ the HPLHS has not given up on *CTHULHU LIVES*:

Leman: It ain’t never going to be dead. I mean, it’ll take—it’ll be slower between them, but, believe me, we will never stop playing *CTHULHU LIVES*.

Branney: And the last couple games were some of our biggest games ever, and frankly, some of our best games ever. (Personal interview)

¹⁶ This is the first half of the most famous couplet from Lovecraft’s most famous fictional creation, the *Necronomicon*: “That is not dead which can eternal lie / And with strange eons, even death may die.” In the way I am using it, something that cannot be killed always has the potential to return.

The possible direction for the future of *CTHULHU LIVES* is uncertain, though there are interesting new possibilities for the game: “We may be approaching the point where upping the ante actually means scaling it down a bit” (Leman, Personal interview). To that end, Branney had written a game that would address the difficulties of running a *CTHULHU LIVES* game while not sacrificing the intensity and fun involved. Though the HPLHS had yet to find time to play it, in 2005 they were approached by the organizers of the first MiskatoniCon, a Lovecraft convention in Stockholm, Sweden. Branney adapted the script, letting the organizers know his exact needs and specifications, and prepared for this new *CTHULHU LIVES* venture:

It was done as a 24-hour non-stop play marathon, involving driving hundreds of miles. All the locations that we do over a three-week game, squished into twenty-four hours. So that I can turn to my players and go, “Okay, I need you from eight a.m. Saturday, and I give you back eight a.m. Sunday. And you block off twenty-four hours and all you’re going to do is play *CTHULHU*. You need twenty-five bucks, cash, of your own, and a driver’s license and, apart from that, you’re mine.” (Branney, Personal interview)

Occurring in late November, 2005, this was the first game of *CTHULHU LIVES* played in almost seven years. The reaction from Leman was, “It was both fraught with problems and highly successful” (Letter). Irreplaceable props were lost in transit, there was miscommunication between the creators and the convention organizers, and most of the games were done in Swedish or Finnish. Despite this, the games were deemed successes: “[The players] all really embraced the terrible options we had given the, and let the emotional weight of their decisions

sink in on them.... The game worked quite well as a portable, playable event, and it's encouraging" (Leman, Letter). This single game was played four different times, with different players in each game. Leman expressed interest in playing this particular game with American players, such as the attendees at the Lovecraft Film Festival. It appears to be only the start of the next stage of development in the structure of *CTHULHU LIVES*.

Though the game in Sweden was a new endeavor for the HPLHS, the request from the MiskatoniCon was not new. As the HPLHS's stock in the Lovecraft community rose, they had been asked for all their game notes, or to run *CTHULHU LIVES* games for whatever Lovecraft event (such as the Lovecraft Film Festival or MiskatoniCon). While the organization is known for this LARP, it has begun to grow beyond the scope of only being a LARP group. At this point in the history of the game and its players, the game has become but a part of the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society.

5. BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE HPLHS, CONCLUSIONS

"I would say our primary goal now is to continue to bring Lovecraftian fun, in many different forms (games, movies, music, publications, props), to an ever-widening audience."

—Andrew Leman (in a letter to the author)

From LARP to Slamdance: The H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society

The first social entity centered around *CTHULHU LIVES* was something more informal than the HPLHS. "[C]ome the end of the first year, I don't know whether it timed up with the Oscars or what, but, for whatever reason, we thought, 'We ought to get together, have a party, and just sort of pat ourselves on the back for being so frightfully clever'" (Leman, Personal interview). This celebration became known as the Black Tentacle Awards, named after the bit of spray-painted toy octopus that was handed out as an award. This annual event, "basically... an excuse to see each other and wear fancy clothing" (Leman, Personal Interview), lasted for four years. Its end came shortly after the primary keepers moved to different cities.

The Black Tentacle was a fun event for an informal group of friends. For a little over two years, the *CTHULHU LIVES* players remained as such. It did not take long, however, for the active players to become more ambitious. "[W]e were finding more and more people were interested in what we were doing and thought it'd be good to form some sort of club or organization that sort of centered on what we were doing" (Branney, Personal interview). This interest is hardly surprising, considering what was going at that time, in terms of Lovecraft. This is at the same time that Stuart Gordon made his first two theatrical releases, the soon-to-be cult films, *Re-Animator* and *From Beyond*. Dirk Mosig had published his groundbreaking work on Lovecraft, and Joshi was starting to write his own scholarship. The *Call of Cthulhu* game was still new and garnering more interest. "In January of 1987 the group opted to formally create an organization, called The H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society. Sean Branney served as President, while Andrew

Leman and Philip Bell served as Co-Vice Presidents” (Branney and Leman 24-5). The name itself derives from an amusing occurrence during a game of *CTHULHU LIVES*. During a game on the University of Colorado campus, Branney and Bell were keepers for a game:

And we were doing a thing, a scenario... which involved some ninjas. And there was a concert or some big event on campus that night. And somebody freaked out seeing ninjas leaping out of trees or whatever, and the next thing we know, boom. In come four police cars, lights on... So I'm actually spread-eagle on the back of a police car, being frisked, and the officer's like, "What's going on? Who's in charge?" So people point to me. And he's like, "What's going on?" And I'm like, "We're... the... H.P. Lovecraft... Historical Society... And we're doing a historical simulation." To which he was like, "Well... you shouldn't be doing that sort of thing," and was flummoxed enough by my answer to pretty much let us go. And nobody got finger-printed or booked. But that was the first time that term had ever been used. Being a historical society was really a means to try to keep me out of jail. (Branney, Personal interview)

Besides keeping keepers in the clear, the HPLHS endeavored to spread their experiences beyond Colorado. "One of the first things that the Society did was to start publishing a magazine, to sort of chronicle what we were doing and let other people know in different parts of the country and the world know what's going on with live-action role-playing and other things about Lovecraftian history or the Mythos" (Branney, Personal interview). This magazine, *Strange*

Eons, contained articles and commentaries about games played, techniques employed, 1920s history, humor, art, and anything the HPLHS thought people would be interested in. By the end of the two-year run of *Strange Eons*, the HPLHS had near a hundred dues-paying members spread over America and Europe.

In 1987, the HPLHS extended its activities into another non-game medium. Andrew Leman wrote and directed “The Testimony of Randolph Carter,” a short film based off a story by Lovecraft. The cast and crew were drawn from HPLHS members, and the film was used as a student project. “According to *The Lurker in the Lobby*,¹ this is one of the oldest amateur Lovecraft film adaptations known to exist. It was shot in the summer of 1987 on a home VHS tape deck, and edited on a linear twin tape deck system. What the film lacks in the way of sound and image quality it makes up in sheer sanity-blasting length” (HPLHS, “Testimony”). This description of their own movie is humorous, yet honest. The HPLHS used the resources and experiences from its gaming and collegiate endeavors, and the results were interesting. They played with a theatrical, expressionistic courtroom interrogation of the protagonist as a framing device. Inside this frame, Leman told Lovecraft’s story through flashbacks (often using a blue filter). Aesthetically, it was engaging, though the definite function of the framing device was a little unclear. The HPLHS pokes fun at this fact on its website: “Is it a trial? Is it the manifestation of a guilty conscience? Or is it just a low-budget production?” (“Testimony”). And the length is, well, sanity-blasting. An entry in the 2005 Lovecraft Film Festival, “The Statement of Randolph Carter,” was based on the same story; it clocked in a twelve minutes. The HPLHS film from 1987 was fifty-three minutes long. With tongue firmly in cheek, the director “reviews” his film as: “A brilliant adaptation. Faithful to the original story while bringing an impressive

¹ *The Lurker in the Lobby: The Guide to Lovecraftian Cinema* is an exhaustive guide to films and television shows influenced by H.P. Lovecraft. One of its authors (Andrew Migliore) is responsible for Lurker Films (a production company dedicated to releasing Lovecraftian film and audio) and the H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival.

thematic depth and richness of detail. Considering the inexperience and meager resources of the filmmakers, it's amazing. Too bad it's so f---ing long" (HPLHS, "Testimony"). Self-deprecation aside, "The Testimony of Randolph Carter" is an important event in the HPLHS history. It was the first venture outside the realms of gaming and self-publication, and a precursor to modern-day HPLHS activities. It also demonstrates the organization using its experiences to produce something new: part of the budget came from the Colorado College Award in Literature, the actors came from *CTHULHU LIVES* games, as did the period items and prop-making experience.

Less than a year after the film was made, the three officers moved to different cities. This was shortly after the previously mentioned game, "The Master Race," was played. Branney moved to California, while Leman went to Illinois. Though there was worry that this might have been the last game, both men started to play *CTHULHU LIVES* again. It is from this point that their respective and differing play styles emerged. Branney's games were still, technically, under the auspices of the HPLHS, though "regular publication of the newsletter was discontinued, and membership fees were no longer collected" (Branney and Leman 25). Leman worked with a fellow student, Jamie Anderson, and began playing games in Illinois under the name of the Revisionist Historical Society (RHS). The name of this splinter group of the HPLHS draws from the interest of its primary keepers. "Jamie and I were, I think, more into the actual historical aspect of the games" (Leman, Personal interview). This interest in speculative historical fiction² is evident in the *CTHULHU LIVES* game, "Dirt." The notes from the game reveal a narrative about conspiracy and government cover-up, but set in the '20s. In it, the players are hired by Abraham Lincoln's descendent to ferret out the truth behind the assassination:

² Lovecraftian RPGs seem to be hotbeds for the kind of fiction that best-selling author Dan Brown has recently made famous. Much like H.P. Lovecraft might blend history with Mythos fiction, Cthulhu games have a tendency to blur the lines between actual history and speculative history.

Truth is stranger than fiction. Many of the story ideas in the game came from Keeper research into the many actual conspiracy theories surrounding the Lincoln assassination. The character of Bernie Babcock was based on (and named after) a real-life person, the author of *Booth and the Spirit of Lincoln*, a 1925 book which served as a major inspiration for a number of plot points. (HPLHS, Game #57)

This was also a time when the games were becoming more elaborate and spectacular, though in different ways. The split in style was less an aesthetic one, but more due to the resources each organization had:

I think both groups developed along much the same lines. Sean took advantage of the resources available to him in California, while I took advantage of what was available to me in Illinois. Sean met Hollywood special effects experts and had help from them. I met people who did Kabuki theatre and borrowed ideas for staging from them. Our games continued to be story-driven and light on formal rules. (Leman, Letter)

By the mid-nineties, the HPLHS and RHS gained even more exposure in the Lovecraft community. There was the write-up of *CTHULHU LIVES* in *The Unspeakable Oath*, and the first edition of *Cthulhu Live* drew its photographs primarily from *CTHULHU LIVES* games.³

When Leman moved to Los Angeles, the two organizations reformed into a single entity. It was less of two organizations rejoining, but more of one rising from the dead: “The two didn’t

³ These were mentioned in chapter four.

‘reunite’ so much as the RHS just kind of faded away after Jamie Anderson and I went our separate ways. When I moved to Los Angeles and Sean and I were together again, new life was infused into the dormant HPLHS, and with the launch of our website we were fully back in action” (Leman, Letter). Since that time, a few games have been played, but the organization has been extremely busy with other endeavors. Functioning in a similar fashion to the original *Strange Eons* magazine, the HPLHS website has provided Cthulhu gamers with plenty of support materials. For example, the *In the Time of Lovecraft* material features research to help keepers create a more accurate version of the U.S. in the ’20 and ’30s. They also have created prop documents, fonts, and instructions, as well as a free Adobe Acrobat .PDF file for gamers who might want to try their hand at running the *CTHULHU LIVES* game, “The Helmet.” Much like the original intent of the HPLHS, the latest incarnation of the organization provides a bevy of gaming material for like-minded individuals:

Branney: Yeah, we started this, in a way, but if other people want to play the game we like to play, it—

Leman: And that’s one reason that... on the website, we have lengthy descriptions of some of our old games, and even provide .PDF versions of some of the props. Go, run it, here’s the recording, here’s the props, have fun. (Personal interview)

The game archives serve both a history of the game, and as an example of how others might run a similar style of LARP. The prop documents and fonts give players tools to create authentic-looking clues. And the instructions are a means for interested parties to create a game without having to start from scratch.

But the HPLHS has expanded its goals beyond gaming and support material. In 2000, the HPLHS embarked upon a multifaceted and multimedia endeavor, known as *A Shoggoth on the Roof*.⁴ In the same vein as *The Blair Witch Project*, they created a short mockumentary about a “real” 1979 stage musical by the same title. In addition to the documentary, which included interviews with notables in the Lovecraft community (and an Altoids-popping Chris Sarandon), HPLHS created a libretto and cast recording for *A Shoggoth on the Roof*, a parody using the same melodies as *A Fiddler on the Roof*. Going even further, a couple years later, *Shoggoth* looked to get a staged production. Defiant Theatre, a Chicago theatre whose company members included a few core *CTHULHU LIVES* players, was in pre-production for the musical. In 2003, however, theatrical fiction and legal reality intersected. According to the mockumentary, the “original” 1979 production had been cursed, and never performed.⁵ The Defiant Theatre fell under a curse of another type: “under threat of legal action by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick, the composer and lyricist of the beloved classic *Fiddler on the Roof*, Defiant has regretfully decided it must cancel the production. *Shoggoth* is, once again, silenced” (HPLHS, “Shoggoth”). The problem was that the musical was a parody of *Fiddler*, and this is what ended up sinking it in the United States. The HPLHS response was tongue-in-cheek:

A Shoggoth on the Roof is a parody, and parody is a fair use well protected under US copyright law. Although neither HPLHS nor Defiant Theatre are (or would have been) in the wrong, neither organization has the financial strength to withstand an onslaught

⁴ A shoggoth is a horrible gelatinous creature first introduced by Lovecraft in “At the Mountains of Madness”: “fetid, black iridescence... terrible, indescribable thing vaster than any subway train—a shapeless congeries of protoplasmic bubbles, faintly self-luminous, and with myriads of temporary eyes forming and un-forming as pustules of greenish light” (344). How does it stay on the roof? The musical answers that with one word: tentacles!

⁵ As the tagline from the mockumentary stated, “There are some things man was not meant to adapt to musical theatre.”

from the great old ones⁶ Bock and Harnick and their legal servitors. Insanity rules yet again. (HPLHS, “Shoggoth”)

The HPLHS may have had the last laugh in this battle. In late 2005, at the MiskatoniCon in Sweden, Teater Tentakel produced a three-show run of *A Shoggoth on the Roof*. Translated into Swedish, *En Shoggoth på Taket* included a Cthulhu Klezmer band and played to packed houses. The HPLHS response was realistic praise (“an excellent job with limited resources”), along with the hope that “their triumph will inspire other theatre companies around the world to produce the unproduceable” (HPLHS, “Shoggoth”). Though there have been no plans to do so yet, the Swedish production proved to Leman “it’s crystal clear that an English production would be extremely entertaining” (Letter). Whatever the fate of an eventual fate of such a production, the HPLHS has forged ahead with other Lovecraftian projects..

Also in 2005, the HPLHS released its most recent project: a filmic version of the popular H.P. Lovecraft story, “The Call of Cthulhu.” The film was produced in a style of classic 1920s silent films, though it utilized modern digital technology. The resulting cinematographic style was dubbed “MythoScape,” and displayed the sense of fun, reverence, and creativity that pervaded the group’s gaming. At its premiere at the H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival in 2005, it garnered two awards: the audience award for Best of Show, and the jury prize for Best Short Film. Critically, the Lovecraft and genre reviewers held back no praise: “A watershed event for Lovecraftian cinema,” is how the director of the Lovecraft Film Festival described it. Under the subheading of “Best HPL Adaptation to Date,” SciFi Channel’s online reviewer Paul Di Filippo wrote, “The reverence, talent, skill, ingenuity, love, insight and craft of all hands associated with this film cannot be overstated” (SciFi.com). The Horror Channel started its review by

⁶ “Great old ones” is a reference to the entities of Lovecraft’s Mythos. They are the cosmically “evil” beings who will destroy humanity and usher in a new dark age.

mentioning *Nosferatu* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and ended it by saying: “‘The Call of Cthulhu’ is indeed a step forward for the world of H. P. Lovecraft cinema. It is one of a handful of new films made by fans of the late great authors work, who not only see the prospect in the mines, but are able to understand the rock they are hidden within” (Bostaph). Lovecraft filmmaker and reviewer Aaron Vanek was unabashed in his praise:

The hubris in making a black and white silent picture (shot on video) in the 21st century is galling; the fact that it still turned out so well only adds to the legendary genius (madness?) of Leman and Branney. I will even go so far to say that their “Call of Cthulhu” is a film that all future Lovecraft adaptations will be compared to. This is the watermark, people. (Vanek)⁷

It has continued to screen at festivals across the world, including a stop in Park City at the acclaimed Slamdance Film Festival.⁸ The HPLHS has come a long way from the ninjas on a campus to creating an official selection screened at Slamdance.

“The Call of Cthulhu” also corresponds with a new era for the HPLHS: that of a self-sustaining hobby. “In fact, we have been compelled to hire an employee to keep up with things” (Leman, Letter). With all the interest generated by their games, films, and musical, people have wanted a piece of the experience. “It was never our intention to be guys who sell T-shirts. That just sort of—along the way, we generated so much content, in the process of making all these games” (Leman, Personal interview). On their website, they have not only T-shirts, but also CDs

⁷ To be fair, Vanek has worked with the HPLHS on projects (including a cameo as a dancing culture in this film), and he admits that he might be biased. On the other hand, he has worked with many, many people in the Lovecraft creative community in his ten years making and reviewing films.

⁸ Slamdance was a reaction to the growing corporate interest in the Sundance Film Festival. Held at the same time and relative location as Sundance, Slamdance intentionally competes against the bigger festival by claiming that it is the one dedicated to real “indie” films. The Slamdance tagline is, “by filmmakers, for filmmakers.”

(including the cast recording of *Shoggoth*), an array of extra '20s-era fonts, their films on DVD, and various detailed and hand-crafted props. This self-sustaining aspect is a very recent occurrence, but it gives the HPLHS a level of creative freedom: “now, if we want to develop a new fun project, we can do it without worrying too much about the mortgage or the rent or whatever” (Leman, Personal interview). And they have ambitious plans for more fun projects, encompassing all the entertainment mediums the HPLHS revels in:

We’re planning a second album of Solstice carols for this winter.

We are working on our massive 17th-century Necronomicon.

There’s a volume 2 of the prop documents collection. And we’re developing two new film projects: a feature-length “talkie” of “The Whisperer in Darkness” and an all-stop-motion animated *Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath*,⁹ inspired by the work of an artist we met in Stockholm. (Lemans, Letter)

Among all this flurry of activity, the HPLHS also plans to do keep running *CTHULHU LIVES* games. Though there are no definite plans, a recurring possibility is running the MiskatoniCon game for the Lovecraft Film Festival. Such an event would fall into their goal of spreading Lovecraftian fun, in many forms, to an ever-widening audience. This goal is possible because the HPLHS has become a prominent player, creatively and financially, in the Lovecraft and gaming communities. This prominence and self-sustainability has been a pleasant surprise for the HPLHS: “Website sales have been good, and we now have retailers in various parts of the world who sell our stuff directly in stores. We have recently been talking about a distribution

⁹ Both of these were originally written by Lovecraft, the former a short story, the latter a novella.

arrangement in the UK, and we have several retailers in Scandinavia. It's insane" (Leman, Letter). And what would a Lovecraftian society be, without insanity?

Conclusions

Why *CTHULHU LIVES*? My first introduction to this particular game and the HPLHS was through the first edition of McLaughlin's *Cthulhu Live*. I was reintroduced to the HPLHS when I found out about *A Shoggoth on the Roof*. What attracted me to studying this group was its lack of "official" standing in relation to gaming companies. Other gaming organizations, such as White Wolf's Camarilla or McLaughlin's *Cthulhu Live*, are groups just as worthy of study. Both are also "official" gaming groups or game versions; these organizations have a company behind them or licensing them. In contrast, the HPLHS is its own entity. *CTHULHU LIVES* has no official denotation, and it has no published game books (articles and prop documents, yes). It is not an uncommon act for motivated gamers to create their own game. What is uncommon the U.S. is for an amateur gaming group to create something that becomes as big as *CTHULHU LIVES*, or ends up as a self-sustaining entity without company sanction, such as the HPLHS. Branching out to other mediums, as the HPLHS has done, is a rarity, as well; it may not be surprising, given the backgrounds of Branney, Leman, and its core players, but a rarity nonetheless.

Of interest is also the nature of Cthulhu Lives as a hobby. Gaming, in general, represents a difficulty for the more traditional views of hobby.¹⁰ But LARPs in general, and Cthulhu Lives specifically, offer case examples relating to the discussions of "work" and "play" (or "leisure"). Historian Steven Gelber wrote an entire book around the idea that the work-like aspect of hobbies, of "productive leisure," helped reinforce capitalist ideals and the American work

¹⁰ Gelber. {} To be fair, the book's focus tends to stop before 1970, right around the time wargaming was about to give birth to RPGs

ethic.¹¹ Victor Turner questions the sharp distinction between “work” and “play/leisure,” declaring such a distinction as “an artifact of the Industrial Revolution.” It is better, he states, “to see symbolic-expressive genres... as being at once work and play or at least as cultural activities in which work and play are intricately inter-calibrated” (32). To look at the duties of the keepers (and sometimes the NPCs) in a *CTHULHU LIVES* game, there is a lot of “work” involved in game-preparation and –running. A lot. But there is enjoyment in these endeavors, and the game’s purpose is “fun.” *CTHULHU LIVES* reinforces Turner’s questioning of the work/play dichotomy.

Perhaps a better term to use, without the connotation of drudgery that “to work” lugs around, is “to produce.” This verb has a ring of creation and passion to it. Anyone perusing the HPLHS archives, or talking to Sean Branney or Andrew Leman, will notice the amount of excitement, involvement, and passion brought to *CTHULHU LIVES* and other HPLHS projects. I would argue that this passionate producing was a major contributing factor to the rise and current status of the HPLHS. Such a factor alone would not account for this status, but combine it with their skills, experiences, and contacts in gaming and the arts, as well as the time period in which *CTHULHU LIVES* and *Strange Eons* were created; this combination, in hindsight, obscures the fact that the popularity and self-sustainability of the HPLHS is something non-commercial gamers rarely achieve. Gelber would point out that these factors are the hallmarks of productive leisure; additionally, the theatrical and design skills of Branney and Leman are an example of “spillover” that effects and influences their leisure activities. The problem with Gelber’s definition of hobby is that, “To remain hobbies, productive pastimes must produce items of value whose value remains secondary.” What is secondary value? Gelber’s vague definition is problematic: “Once... crafters begin to measure their projects by the price they will fetch when sold, they

¹¹ Gelber’s conclusion come as the answer to the question he poses: why do hobbies (which are leisurely) seem to so closely resemble what we would consider to be work?

compromise their hobbies' purity by making them too businesslike and undermining the sense of freedom that distinguishes work from leisure" (35). It would be difficult to argue that items such as the Very Scary Solstice CD or the collection of prop documents and fonts render *CTHULHU LIVES* as less pure, simply because they are packaged for sale and affixed with a price. Along similar lines, does selling prop re-creations from their "Call of Cthulhu" film reduce the "purity" of these items and the film? To make this even more problematic, the revenue generated goes back into making more "Lovecraftian fun." Perhaps we should take a break from the traditional view of hobbies, and look at the fact that the HPLHS is creating what it wants to create, without having to compromise the product due to the influence of external funding. Though they may not have the budget of a large Hollywood studio, they are able to produce many creative artifacts without having to spend their rent or mortgage money: "Now that we've finished 'Call of Cthulhu,' and survived within our means, and once we get it paid for, we'll be in a better position than ever to do another movie and the means for it goes up a little bit. And, I think that's been an important lesson of *CTHULHU* games" (Branney, Personal interview). Such a lesson has allowed the HPLHS to be a very prolific creative organization.

This idea of learning a lesson from a game brings up another area of interest: the pedagogical aspect of games. It is difficult to apply the ideas of pedagogy, education, and intentional learning to games; these are not the primary, or even the secondary, goals of games in the vein of RPGs and LARPs. Yet, learning does appear to be an important byproduct of these games. Most apparent is the historical aspect of *CTHULHU LIVES*:

[O]ne of the things that turns me on about this game is the time period that it's set in, the twenties and thirties. I hadn't really paid much attention to it before I started playing this game, but once I

did, I was just totally hooked by the historical period.... I got hooked on reading all about the real characters of the age and trying to work up story ideas that would involve stuff from the period. (Leman, Personal interview)

Learning history through gaming is not a byproduct unique to *CTHULHU LIVES*. A player of Koei's historical simulation video games, for example, is immersed in the stories and history of Three Kingdoms China or *sengoku* Japan.¹² Games can also so more than passively impart knowledge. As Leman demonstrates, there is also the possibility that the players will actively seek out information, whether for personal edification or to improve gameplay. This is evident in *CTHULHU LIVES*, as Branney and Leman learned ancient languages, and Branney studied archeology, "because I was into it, but it also helped the game and certainly learning to read and write hieroglyphics is useful when you're making stuff like this [indicates "The Call of Cthulhu" props] for fun" (Personal interview). Again, this is not to say that games such as *CTHULHU LIVES* should be implemented as teaching tools; learning is a byproduct, not a goal. When it comes to learning facts, games can help, but that is not why a person will normally play them.

Another avenue of learning is skill-based. To create better game sessions, it behooves a player or keeper not only to learn information, but to improve upon certain skills. This was hinted at in the fourth chapter, where Branney and Leman describe the post-game sessions as social events where player and keeper alike can garner feedback and learn how to improve their gaming skills. Not all such skills are limited to the gaming medium. As was mentioned, one of the things putting on *CTHULHU LIVES* games "teaches" keepers is how to produce. Branney

¹² Koei is a Japanese video game company who bases their games in Asian history. Games range from diplomatic simulations (the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* games), to tactical games (the *Dynasty Tactics* and *Kessen* series), and the combat-heavy games (their most popular series, *Dynasty Warriors* and *Samurai Warriors*). Even more interestingly, to unlock better items and upgrades, players will often have to go through the same actions as a historical warrior, or succeed where the warrior failed in history.

described it as a weird hybrid of film and stage production: “The time I was at CalArts, I learned a lot about producing, and putting on games teaches you a lot about producing.... from a production standpoint, I certainly started learning more about how to get crazier shit done. And more complex things, and utilize more broad resources, and that was very helpful” (Personal interview). And it does not mean that games always had to be elaborate spectacles with helicopters and time portals. For less than five dollars, Judy Ruha, a core player from the Colorado years, was a keeper for the “Daughters of Shub-Niggurath” game. “It was a very kind of women’s-lib *CTHULHU* story about the crazed midwives and dark goddesses and all that, and it was fun. It was great. But it was also done on a very austere budget. But still with creativity and imagination that made it work as an experience” (Branney, Personal interview). Creating *CTHULHU LIVES* games is also a workshop in scriptwriting and a means of studying differences in mediums. As evidenced by Branney’s view of dramatic writing, creating a complex LARP script requires dedicated and thoughtful writing. Even if nobody sees what is written down, the writer must interweave objective and subjective threads of a script: “[I]n the end, working with these two forces in this arena of storytelling is also, I think, just great practice for writing screenplays or novels or any other type of writing” (Branney, Personal interview). And by looking comparing the differences between the processes of scripting for film, theatre, and game, we can gain insight into the way each medium works differently. ForLARPs, the mutual story creation that happens is “part, really, of the excitement. There aren’t very many storytelling formats where... the storyteller doesn’t know how it’s going to end” (Branney and Leman, Personal interview). This kind of gaming takes the traditional exercise of hot-seating a script character, and lets someone else work with the keeper to see where said character will go.

Finally, *CTHULHU LIVES* can provide a unique avenue of performance. In the beginning of this study, I brought up Boal, and how his style of theatre reminded me of RPGs and LARPs. I also mentioned “Operation: Mallfinger,” where students took Boal’s techniques, applied them to popular culture, and commented that it should be packaged as a role-playing game. *CTHULHU LIVES* is the realization of this impulse. There is something to be said about a medium that uses techniques similar to avant-garde performance styles, but for no other reason than pure fun. Many LARPers, including Branney and Leman, point out that LARPing is not “acting.” However, it does give performers (some of whom might never consider themselves “actors”) a chance to play roles in a safe and enjoyable environment. As some of the specific examples in chapter four highlighted, this does not necessitate an experience devoid of depth and resonance. Whether it was the emotional response to the infant’s corpse in “The Ninth Talisman,” or the dehumanizing of investigators during “The Epic,” *CTHULHU LIVES* provided a laboratory environment (to use Leman’s words) for performers to enact roles in a liminal space. Though LARPs may not be a tool that could be used in a classroom for definable pedagogical results, it would be folly to deny that a *CTHULHU LIVES* game would not help a performer or director in any tangible way. As McLaughlin mentioned, there are elements of improvisational theatre and character work in LARPs. The thing to remember, again, is though they might be beneficial performance exercises, games such as *CTHULHU LIVES* are not meant to be exercises dedicated to a pedagogical end. Their goal is fun and enjoyment; to try and turn them into something whose primary goal is otherwise, is to misuse the medium.

CTHULHU LIVES stands at the crossroads of art and entertainment, theatre and gaming, work and play. In the end, it is important because it has transcended the traditional constraints of theatre and game, while having a foot in each.

Where Do We Go From Here: Avenues for Further Research

Even as I am putting the finishing touches upon this study, I cannot help but think of where future research could continue. Right away, I know that a wider and deeper study of *CTHULHU LIVES* and the HPLHS could be done. Due to time, resources, and length, this one limited itself to interviews with Sean Branney and Andrew Leman, as well as the archives found on the website. Though these two artists are the primary culprits behind *CTHULHU LIVES*, there are many others who could be interviewed, such as Darrell Tutchton (co-founder and keeper in earlier games), Judy Ruha (keeper for multiple early games, including “Daughters of Shub-Niggurath”), Philip Bell (third HPLHS officer in the early years and regular keeper), and Jamie Anderson (co-founder of the RHS and regular keeper). Such a study might also interview core players from all the eras and regions of *CTHULHU LIVES* games, as well as having the time to gather information on games that are not yet archived.

Another possibility would be to focus on *Cthulhu Live* and Robert McLaughlin’s gaming group. Privileging the HPLHS in this study was a choice; in no way does it imply that one style of LARP is better than the other. Since *Cthulhu Live* is a more traditional LARP, it is easier for players to create games; its published format also provides a standard system. A study on this group might look at the origins of the game, as well as how it became affiliated as the official live-action version of *Call of Cthulhu*. One might also look at the non-game Lovecraftian exploits of the group. For example, Christian Matzke, one of the many writers who contributed to the *Cthulhu Live: Player’s Companion*, has recently become a regular in the Lovecraft Film Festival’s short film entries.¹³

¹³ Matzke’s latest entry, one of the top short entries at the 2005 Festival, was “Experiment 17.” Shot in the format similar to a History Channel segment, this mock documentary was narrated by none other than Andrew Leman.

Going in a different direction, future research could look at the process by which RPG and LARP characters are created. As the journey from chapter two to chapter four displayed, not all systems are the same. Mackay and Fine have touched upon this area of RPGs, but a dedicated study of such games could examine exactly how and why a game's system breaks a character's attributes into the ones it does. What do such choices say about how a player can perform these numerical skeletons of a character? How does that compare to performing a character in a more free-form game? Another aspect of RPGs andLARPs that merits further research is the meta-game. To those outside gaming, the term is difficult to fully understand; for those inside, it is often an intrinsic part that goes unstudied. But it is a unique element of gaming that demands exploration. Currently, there are a couple folklorists from the University of Indiana trying to publish a much-needed academic anthology on RPGs; if it sees the light of a publishing press, perhaps some of these will be expounded upon.

In the same realm, I am intrigued by the "pedagogy of games" idea. There may seem to be only a slight difference between classroom games that teach (and are fun) and games that are fun (and teach as a byproduct), but it is an important difference. Future studies could look at how effective either tactic is and how they might be blended. A great artifact for such a study would be the Anachronism moveable card game. Created by a former history teacher, the game strives to introduce historically-accurate play elements in a commercial card game. Despite the pedagogical intention, it must primarily be fun, especially since it is a commercial product.

Along the same lines, a study could examine how the marketplace affects RPGs andLARPs in the U.S. The HPLHS is a rare case in the gaming hobby and industry. Granted, an updated study of hobbies in the later part of the twentieth century would need to be undertaken; which gives us another avenue for research. But the idea of self-publishing and self-sustainability

is gaining a foothold in the RPG industry. Such a study might not only talk about the HPLHS, but also the practices of games designers such as Dennis Detwiler and Greg Stolze. After forays into the gaming industry, they have both started using a “ransom” system for publishing games. They introduce a game or supplement idea and a timeframe. If a certain donation level is reached within the timeframe, the designer will go ahead and create the idea. Once completed, the material will be published on their websites in a downloadable Acrobat .pdf file, free of (any further) charge. This is an extremely new concept in RPGs, which is itself in a period of flux.

Finally, there is enough *CTHULHU LIVES* material to go further into performance studies theory with it. I have but described this important performance entity. A thesis- or dissertation-length study might leap from this one into examining *CTHULHU LIVES* in relation to the theories of Auslander or Schechner or Phelan, to name a few. It might also look at how this leisure performance style relates to the performance styles of Boal and his ilk. *CTHULHU LIVES* (and LARPs in general) are a rich site for performance studies research, rarely delved into. My primary concern for any future research based on this study echoes the words of a vaudevillian. Groucho Marx once quipped, “Someday, I’m afraid, the eggheads will take [Red Skelton] up and start reading social significance into his antics. Let’s hope they don’t, because this had ruined many a good performer” (qtd. in DiMeglio 3). The heart of gaming, of *CTHULHU LIVES*, and of the HPLHS is fun. And it is not optional. To ignore the primary goal of fun is to miss the entire point of gaming. The motto of the HPLHS is *ludo fore putavimus*: “we thought it would be fun.” And studying them has been just that.

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CHARACTER NAME _____ PLAYER _____

CLASS AND LEVEL _____ RACE _____ ALIGNMENT _____ DEITY _____

SIZE _____ AGE _____ GENDER _____ HEIGHT _____ WEIGHT _____ EYES _____ HAIR _____ SKIN _____



ABILITY NAME	ABILITY SCORE	ABILITY MODIFIER	TEMPORARY SCORE	TEMPORARY MODIFIER	TOTAL	WOUNDS/CURRENT HP	NONLETHAL DAMAGE	SPEED				
STR STRENGTH					HP HIT POINTS							
DEX DEXTERITY					AC ARMOR CLASS	TOTAL = 10 + <input type="text"/> + <input type="text"/> + <input type="text"/> + <input type="text"/> + <input type="text"/> + <input type="text"/> + <input type="text"/>	DAMAGE REDUCTION					
CON CONSTITUTION						ARMOR BONUS	SHIELD BONUS	DEX MODIFIER	SIZE MODIFIER	NATURAL ARMOR	DEFLECTION MODIFIER	MISC MODIFIER
INT INTELLIGENCE					TOUCH ARMOR CLASS	FLAT-FOOTED ARMOR CLASS						
WIS WISDOM					INITIATIVE MODIFIER	TOTAL = <input type="text"/> + <input type="text"/>						
CHA CHARISMA						DEX MODIFIER	MISC MODIFIER					

SAVING THROWS	TOTAL	BASE SAVE	ABILITY MODIFIER	MAGIC MODIFIER	MISC. MODIFIER	TEMPORARY MODIFIER	CONDITIONAL MODIFIERS
FORTITUDE (CONSTITUTION)							
REFLEX (DEXTERITY)							
WILL (WISDOM)							

BASE ATTACK BONUS	<input type="text"/>	SPELL RESISTANCE	<input type="text"/>
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GRAPPLE MODIFIER	<input type="text"/>	TOTAL	<input type="text"/>	BASE ATTACK BONUS	<input type="text"/>	STRENGTH MODIFIER	<input type="text"/>	SIZE MODIFIER	<input type="text"/>	MISC MODIFIER	<input type="text"/>
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ATTACK		ATTACK BONUS	DAMAGE	CRITICAL
RANGE	TYPE	NOTES		

AMMUNITION _____

ATTACK		ATTACK BONUS	DAMAGE	CRITICAL
RANGE	TYPE	NOTES		

AMMUNITION _____

ATTACK		ATTACK BONUS	DAMAGE	CRITICAL
RANGE	TYPE	NOTES		

AMMUNITION _____

ATTACK		ATTACK BONUS	DAMAGE	CRITICAL
RANGE	TYPE	NOTES		

AMMUNITION _____

ATTACK		ATTACK BONUS	DAMAGE	CRITICAL
RANGE	TYPE	NOTES		

AMMUNITION _____

CLASS SKILL	SKILL NAME	KEY ABILITY	SKILL MODIFIER	MAX RANKS (CLASS/CROSS-CLASS)	
				ABILITY MODIFIER	RANKS
	<input type="checkbox"/> APPRAISE ■	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> BALANCE ■	DEX*			
	<input type="checkbox"/> BLUFF ■	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> CLIMB ■	STR*			
	<input type="checkbox"/> CONCENTRATION ■	CON			
	<input type="checkbox"/> CRAFT ■ ()	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> CRAFT ■ ()	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> CRAFT ■ ()	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> DECIPHER SCRIPT	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> DIPLOMACY ■	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> DISABLE DEVICE	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> DISGUISE ■	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> ESCAPE ARTIST ■	DEX*			
	<input type="checkbox"/> FORGERY ■	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> GATHER INFORMATION ■	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> HANDLE ANIMAL	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> HEAL ■	WIS			
	<input type="checkbox"/> HIDE ■	DEX*			
	<input type="checkbox"/> INTIMIDATE ■	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> JUMP ■	STR*			
	<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> KNOWLEDGE ()	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> LISTEN ■	WIS			
	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVE SILENTLY ■	DEX*			
	<input type="checkbox"/> OPEN LOCK	DEX			
	<input type="checkbox"/> PERFORM ()	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> PERFORM ()	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> PERFORM ()	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> PROFESSION ()	WIS			
	<input type="checkbox"/> PROFESSION ()	WIS			
	<input type="checkbox"/> RIDE ■	DEX			
	<input type="checkbox"/> SEARCH ■	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> SENSE MOTIVE ■	WIS			
	<input type="checkbox"/> SLEIGHT OF HAND	DEX*			
	<input type="checkbox"/> SPELLCRAFT	INT			
	<input type="checkbox"/> SPOT ■	WIS			
	<input type="checkbox"/> SURVIVAL ■	WIS			
	<input type="checkbox"/> SWIM ■	STR*			
	<input type="checkbox"/> TUMBLE	DEX*			
	<input type="checkbox"/> USE MAGIC DEVICE	CHA			
	<input type="checkbox"/> USE ROPE ■	DEX			
	<input type="checkbox"/> _____				
	<input type="checkbox"/> _____				
	<input type="checkbox"/> _____				

■ Denotes a skill that can be used untrained.
☐ Mark this box with an X if the skill is a class skill for the character.
* Armor check penalty, if any, applies. (Double penalty for Swim.)

DELTA GREEN

Name _____ Occupation _____

Sex _____ Age _____ Nationality _____ Affiliation _____

Schools & Degrees _____ Code Name _____

INVESTIGATOR STATISTICS

STR	DEX	INT	Idea	Damage Bonus _____ Current Date _____
CON	APP	POW	Luck	
SIZ	SAN	EDU	Know	

MAGIC POINTS

Unconscious=	0	1
2	3	4
5	6	7
8	9	10
11	12	13
14	15	16
17	18	19
20	21	22
23	24	25
26		

HIT POINTS

Dead=	0	1	2
3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26
27			

SANITY POINTS & MENTAL HEALTH

(99-Cthulhu Mythos: _____)	Insanity =	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39
40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60
61	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81
82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99			

Phobias _____ Insanities _____

INVESTIGATOR SKILLS

- ☐ Accounting (10) _____
- ☐ Anthropology (00) _____
- ☐ Archaeology (00) _____
- ☐ Architecture (00) _____
- ☐ Art (05): _____
- ☐ Astronomy (00) _____
- ☐ Bargain (05) _____
- ☐ Biology (00) _____
- ☐ Boating (10) _____
- ☐ Botany (00) _____
- ☐ Carpentry/Woodcraft (10) _____
- ☐ Cartography (00) _____
- ☐ Chemistry (00) _____
- ☐ Climb (40) _____
- ☐ Conceal (15) _____
- ☐ Computer Use (00) _____
- ☐ Credit Rating (15) _____
- ☐ Cryptography (00) _____
- ☐ Cthulhu Mythos (00) _____
- ☐ Demolitions (00) _____
- ☐ Disguise (05) _____
- ☐ Dodge (DEX x2) _____
- ☐ Drive Auto (20) _____
- ☐ Electrical Repair (10) _____
- ☐ _____

- ☐ Electronics (00) _____
- ☐ Fast Talk (05) _____
- ☐ First Aid (30) _____
- ☐ Forensics (00) _____
- ☐ Forgery (00) _____
- ☐ Geology (00) _____
- ☐ Hide (10) _____
- ☐ History (20) _____
- ☐ Hypnosis (00) _____
- ☐ Jump (25) _____
- ☐ Law (05) _____
- ☐ Library Use (25) _____
- ☐ Listen (25) _____
- ☐ Locksmith (00) _____
- ☐ Martial Arts (00) _____
- ☐ Mathematics (10) _____
- ☐ Mechanical Repair (20) _____
- ☐ Medicine (05) _____
- ☐ Military Science (00) _____
- ☐ Natural History (10) _____
- ☐ Navigation/Land (10) _____
- ☐ Navigation/Sea, Air (00) _____
- ☐ Occult (05) _____
- ☐ Operate Hvy. Machine (00) _____
- ☐ _____

Other Language (00):

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

Own Language (EDU x5):

- ☐ _____
- ☐ Parachuting (00) _____
- ☐ Persuade (15) _____
- ☐ Pharmacy (00) _____
- ☐ Photography (10) _____
- ☐ Physics (00) _____
- ☐ Pilot (00): _____
- ☐ Psychoanalysis (00) _____
- ☐ Psychology (05) _____
- ☐ Ride (05) _____
- ☐ Sailing (00) _____
- ☐ SCUBA (00) _____
- ☐ Sneak (10) _____
- ☐ Spot Hidden (25) _____
- ☐ Surgery (00) _____
- ☐ Swim (25) _____
- ☐ Throw (25) _____
- ☐ Track (10) _____
- ☐ Zoology (00) _____
- ☐ _____

COMBAT SKILLS

Weapon	Shots	Attk%	Impale	Damage	HP	Ammo
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Weapon	Shots	Attk%	Impale	Damage	HP	Ammo
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

APPENDIX C: *D&D* VS. *CALL OF CTHULHU*

Though *Dungeons & Dragons* is the archetypical RPG, the *Call of Cthulhu* game is what served as inspiration for Cthulhu Lives. The following is a brief overview of how the two games differ from each other. It is by no means exhaustive, but gives a general idea of the differences.

Roles

In *D&D*, the gamemaster is known as the DungeonMaster (DM); in *Call of Cthulhu*, he goes by the moniker of the Keeper, and player-characters are known as Investigators.

Imaginary-Entertainment Environment

D&D, a game in the fantasy genre, takes place in a pseudo-Medieval setting. There is magic, monsters, elves and dwarves, heroes and villains, and adventure. *Call of Cthulhu*, a game in the horror genre, primarily takes place in two specific settings: 1920s and modern-day. The world is the same as the one we live in, except that in the dark places of the world, Lovecraft's Mythos lurks, ready to destroy humanity. The classic *Call of Cthulhu* setting is the 1920s, since this is when Lovecraft lived and wrote. Modern-day settings, such as *Delta Green*, often incorporate government and business conspiracy to Lovecraft's ideas.

The System

D&D uses the D20 System, meaning that most events are resolved by the roll of a twenty-sided die. Skills add or subtract from this roll, and the player attempts to roll at or above a certain number. *Call of Cthulhu* uses the Basic Role-Playing (BRP) System. Most events are resolved with a D100 or "percentile" roll (usually with a pair of ten-sided dice, one designated as the tens, the other as the ones). Skills are displayed as percentages, and a percentile roll at or below the skill level indicates success.

Character Description

Attributes

D&D characters are broken down into STrength, DEXterity, CONstitution, INTelligence, WISdom, and CHARisma. These attributes are often abbreviated to their first three letters, and their values range from one to twenty. *Call of Cthulhu* characters are broken down into STrength, DEXterity, CONstitution, INTelligence, EDUcation, SIZE, APPEARance, and POWER (force of will). These values range from three to eighteen.

Skills

D&D characters have a Job Class, which determines what skills they possess. *Call of Cthulhu* characters have a Profession, which suggests what skills they should possess.

Tallies

Hit Points (HP)

Both systems use HP to record injuries to a character. When a character runs out of HP, they are dead. HP regenerates with rest and first aid. In *D&D*, a character's maximum HP increases every time that character "levels up" (see *Experience Points*, below). In *Call of Cthulhu*, a character's maximum HP is set at creation; it does not increase.

Magic Points (MP)

MP are used to power magical spells in both systems. In *D&D*, magic is not uncommon, consisting of such fantastical spells as Cure Light Wounds and Magic Missile. In *Call of Cthulhu*, magic is exceedingly rare and self-damaging. It is more shamanistic, and warps the laws of physics or summons Mythos entities.

Experience Points

In *D&D*, characters gain Experience Points. These points reflect the level of proficiency a character has in her Job Class, indicated by a numerical "level." For example, a Level 1 character is one who has yet to accumulate 1000 Experience Points. Every time these points hit a certain

echelon (e.g., 1000, 2000, 4000), the character “levels up.” When this happens, the player gets to improve the character’s skills and tallies. *Call of Cthulhu* does not utilize Experience Points.

Instead, a character can slowly increase skills by in-game experiences.

Sanity Points (SAN)

Unique to *Call of Cthulhu*, SAN is a tally that keeps track of a character’s mental health and stability. Seeing dead bodies, coming across Mythos creatures, having a worldview shaken, and coming face-to-tentacle with a Great Old One can all chip away at SAN (some doing more damage to sanity than others). This tally is more important than any other in *Call of Cthulhu*.

APPENDIX D: OVERVIEW OF A *CTHULHU LIVES* GAME

Though there is no definitive structure for a game of *CTHULHU LIVES*, the following is a very basic description of what Keepers and players might expect. Chapter four expands upon this outline in much greater detail, with specific instances. Except where noted, this process is (more or less) in chronological order.¹

Conception

CTHULHU LIVES starts with an idea. Such ideas can come from any source, though they often draw from Lovecraft or previous *CTHULHU LIVES* games. The Keeper(s) then fleshes out the idea into a backstory and a plot. These can be as complex or simple as the Keeper desires, and must provide a coherent outline for the Keeper and non-player characters (NPCs) to work from. Without these, the game could devolve into chaos. After the backstory and plot are written, the scope the game comes into play. The plot is broken down into individual scenarios, played independently of each other. These scenarios often correspond with changes in location, player availability, or a narrative episode.

Game Prep

Once the script is in place, the Keeper needs to coordinate a number of different areas before the first scenario can begin. These happen around the same time; a Keeper will likely be crafting the props during the same week that he is contacting NPCs, scouting locations, and talking to players about their characters. In addition, at any time before preparation is complete, the Keeper may need to go back and make allowances in the script.

Physical Evidence

¹ This description is based directly from interviews with Branney and Leman, as well as their article in *The Unspeakable Oath*, which gives a very concise description of *CTHULHU LIVES*.

Since *Ctuhlhu Lives* is an investigatory game, the Keeper must create all the physical objects or monstrosities that the players might come across during game play. These props are not merely a printout of a letter or a telegram; rather, they would have to be a believable simulation of a yellowed, handwritten letter or a telegram on letterhead in a period font. If a Keeper needs a device, it must be aesthetically interesting as well as functional. The craftsmanship on many of these props and monsters would be at a level to that of a film or professional stage production. The Keeper must also come up with ways to achieve any special effects he may have written into the script. Oh, and it all has to be done within the Keeper's financial means.

Location Scouting

Many LARPs will use a single setting, and divide it up into different "locations." *CTHULHU LIVES* uses actual locations. Much like a film crew might scout locations, a Keeper must find, secure, and prepare each of these locations prior to playing the scenario. There are many considerations for a location: does it fit the theme and mood of the scenario? Does it meet the logistical needs of the script? Is it safe, both in terms of the performers' personal safety and the safety of anyone outside of the game? Is it legal, and can the scenario be played there without interference? Once locations are found, the Keeper needs to prepare the location for game play, including the placement of clues and rearrangement of layout.

Support Staff

The Keeper is not the only person putting on the game. Though he is in charge, he relies upon a staff of NPCs, who also might also function as stagehands, puppeteers, or *kokens*. He must contact and secure the assistance of all these people while preparing for a game. It is imperative that the Keeper clearly briefs this staff on the backstory and plot, as well as each of

the specific roles each person needs to perform. It is even more imperative that the staff understands all this, as there might be times that the NPCs will be setting up or waiting for players, without the Keeper around to answer questions. This is the time to hand out maps, show NPCs the locations, and stress punctuality. It is also important that the Keeper prepares the NPCs for likely character actions, along with how to handle things when the game starts to go off-script. Above all, the Keeper needs to impart the nature of working with the players, not competing against them.

Player Coordination

During all of this preparation, the Keeper will be working with players to create their characters. Though the Keeper will sometimes give each player a character to play, it is more common that the players will develop their own characters. The Keeper stays in constant communication during this creation process, and makes minor script revisions to incorporate the characters being created. For the player, the responsibility is to create a fully-realized character. Costuming, motivation, history, personal goals, demeanor, and other such factors must be developed by the player prior to game play. The Keeper also makes sure to coordinate everything so that players, NPCs, and the Keeper end up at the same place at the same time, and that everyone knows how long each scenario might last. Once the logistics are completely in place, the first scenario can begin.

Game Play

Players arrive to a scenario's location in character. Their reasons for being there are part of the plot; this is not a random gathering. Often, an NPC will kick the dramatic action into motion. The characters have reason and motivation to solve the mystery, and will accumulate clues as to where to go next. For example, the characters might discover that they were all

indebted to a common benefactor, who has mysteriously disappeared. During the course of the evening, an NPC produces the missing person's journal, indicating that there was a device hidden in the house where the characters met. After searching the house, they discover the device in a secret room. Unfortunately, there is an important piece missing from it. Clues or conversation informs the characters that this piece is probably in the collection of a university or museum. Once they decide to visit this collection, the Keeper informs them that said visit will be the next scenario, to take place the next day or next week. A series of scenarios might have the characters searching the collection and meeting the cultist curator, recovering the missing piece and discovering why the benefactor vanished, and climaxing with the working device being used to destroy the cult and/or save the benefactor.²

What happens during the game depends completely on the players' actions. The Keeper has created a plot, but it is up to the players to discover what is going on around them. It is they who have to go from point A to B to C and so on. They might converse with NPCs and each other, trying to uncover clues. If they find a document with clues, they will need to physically read it and pick out what those clues are. If they need to find corn liqueur in order to make a ritual work, they need to physically search for it (a Keeper will probably have given them a general idea of where such a thing would be). If a player makes a decision that the Keeper did not plan for, he and the NPCs must improvise to accommodate the player's choice. If the players happen to skip over a vital clue, the Keeper might have to re-insert it later into the script. It is much like a play, except that the main characters do not know the plot, and their players do not step "off-stage." The Keeper is in the background, making sure that everything is safe and that the story is progressing (oftentimes, he will also take on the role of an NPC).

² This does not necessarily correspond with any archived *CTHULHU LIVES* game. I have created it for the purposes of providing an example.

Postmortem

After the last scenario of the game has finished, everyone involved takes part in a post-game debriefing. These usually occur at a restaurant, and it provides a means for everyone to unwind and interact with each other out of character. The players will be celebrating their victory over the forces of the Mythos, or bemoaning the fact that they were unable to stop the cultists. It is a time when Keepers and NPCs can tell the players what parts of the plot they missed, or the clues they glossed over. All involved get to re-tell their stories of what happened, and how they reacted. It is a casual event that puts the cap on the *CTHULHU LIVES* game.

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEWS

The following interviews with Sean Branney and Andrew Leman were conducted during the annual H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival in Portland, Oregon, on October 8-9. The first interview occurred at a table outside a café, and abruptly ended when it started raining. The second interview took place at the HPLHS display table, the next day, in between film screenings and table sales. Both interviews were recorded on a digital recorder. The use of punctuation here is intended to recreate the flow of the conversation. In other words, dashes and ellipses do not indicate any kind of cutting, but starts, stops, and pauses during the interview.

J. MICHAEL BESTUL: How would you describe the event that is *CTHULHU LIVES*, the scenarios?

ANDREW LEMAN: Well, each one is unique. We make them, we write them and play them once, and then almost never revisit them, so each one is a unique experience, and because it's so dependent on the participation of the people who are playing, you know, sometimes it's thrillingly intense, and sometimes it's confusion, and sometimes it's... I don't know.

SEAN BRANNEY: Yeah, and when we started doing it, nothing, at least to my knowledge... I mean, the Society for Creative Anachronism was probably the closest thing and that still wasn't really story-driven. And when we were doing it, the notion of live-action role-playing was, you know, something you really had to take time to explain to people. And now it has an acronym, "LARP."

LEMAN: And this was also all before the Internet, so we didn't know that other people existed who had ever thought of this before. There's no way to know that other people were doing this.

BRANNEY: Yeah, and I'd say a unique style of live-action role-playing. 'Cause even though a lot of people do it now, I still have yet to really meet anybody who quite—

LEMAN: Who ever does it the way we do.

BRANNEY: Yeah, who does our approach to it.

BESTUL: So how did you guys design the approach? Obviously, there was the game, *Call of Cthulhu*, and both of you were, whatever the term, “theatre geeks”...

BRANNEY: Yeah, it was really pure trial and error. I think it was an outgrowth of... We used to play the Chaosium role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu*, and one day playing it, go, “Wow, it would be really fun to, like, *really* hide clues around and *really* do this in real life.” And the quick correlation to that was, well, it wouldn't be hard to do, so—

LEMAN: Yeah. Let's do it.

BRANNEY: One of the guys who played, Darrell Tutchton, and I, he's the guy in Savannah, Darrell and I went “all right, we'll put some stuff together.” And a couple of the other guys who played went, “all right, we'll investigate it—“

LEMAN: —and we'll get some costumes—

BRANNEY: —and, you know, there was the first game. And that was really fun, and quickly followed by a second, third, fourth, and pretty soon it's forty, and then fifty, and then sixty.

LEMAN: The one thing I think that we almost immediately—well, not almost—immediately abandoned the idea of dice and rules and—

BRANNEY: —skill checks, and rolls, and it's much more of—

LEMAN: Right. It was always a question of you do what you can do. And if you can't do it, you can't do it.

BRANNEY: Yeah. Much more in the vein of “cowboys & Indians,” or something that’s just plain sensible play. And go, you know, “I shot you.” And you go, “Oh, I got shot, so I fall over and I’m dead,” instead of going, “Well, let me pull out my skill card and roll the dice... ah, it’s a 22, so...” That pulls you out of the experience, instead of going “uahh” and falling to the ground, in the mud.

BESTUL: So what did you guys take from your theatre experiences in building *CTHULHU LIVES*?

BRANNEY: Well, I think one of the things that helped it kind of get going is, there’s a fundamental principle in improvisation, which is, “just say yes,” is how it was introduced to me. Which is, if two people are doing an improv, if someone goes [*in a Scottish accent*], “Ah, Angus, me bagpipe’s jammed,” the other guy doesn’t pretend to be a pizza-maker in Italy. He goes along with Angus and does a Scottish thing. By just buying into what’s going on, suddenly you’re both in the same world, and can “play” together. And I think, while not everybody who was involved was necessarily an actor, in the early days, there were always some actors among them, and I think that helped for the people who were engineers and accountants and economists and things, you know, kind of get in the flow, and go, “Oh, all right, this is what’s going on.” And if we say this is an ancient evil talisman, I believe it, we go from there. {*indecipherable*} Everybody goes “yes, all right,” and we all accept it’s an ancient evil talisman. Now, let’s get on with the story.

BESTUL: How did the game evolve from the first few games played early on, to the a lot more elaborate ones, where you both split off to different colleges?

LEMAN: Before we answer that one, there’s one other specific theatrical technique that I want to mention, which is... I wasn’t introduced to it until after I went to grad school myself, where, I didn’t take the class, but Shozo Sato taught a kabuki theatre class at University

of Illinois. And I would use the concept of “kokens,” which in kabuki theatre are stagehands who are aesthetically invisible. And I love that term, “aesthetically invisible.” They’re people who are there, but we’re all just going to agree to pretend that we can’t see them. And once we have the idea of kokens, who traditionally dress in all black, and a hood and everything... Then the kokens can go and help do special effects and magical, realistic things. And because we’re all agreeing that they’re aesthetically invisible, you ignore the man behind the curtain, and just concentrate on the wizardry that’s happening in front. So that’s another theatrical technique that I’ve found enormously helpful and good to apply to stories that require more elaborate magical manifestations.

BESTUL: Actually, before we go back to how it evolved, what were some of the more difficult, the more memorable manifestations that you’re talking about?

LEMAN: One of the games I ran with my friend, Jamie Anderson, in *CTHUHLU [LIVES]*, was a time-travel game where the players started off as a group in 1931, I think, and one of their friends that was of the group, unbeknownst to them, was this evil wizard who was traveling through time. And she could make a time portal appear in space, and the time portal was made of PVC pipe and a lot of black fabric. And we had kokens who would, when she would say the magic words, they would rush in and open the thing. And so... all of a sudden there was this huge gaping hole that she could into. And the first time it appeared, she jumped, literally, off a roof into the time portal and just fell and vanished into a cloud of smoke. ‘Cause we has kokens at the bottom who had CO2 fire extinguishers and camera flashes, and they were shooting smoke and lightning up through the time portal. And she jumped off the roof, and plunged in, and the players who, you know, didn’t expect any of this... You can’t see the bottom, so they didn’t

know what she jumped into or what she had landed on. And the time portal, after she jumped through, the time portal was still there, so they were given, you know, “Do we jump in after, or do we stay here?” And God bless them, they all decided to jump through, not knowing what they would be landing on, but feeling confident that we wouldn’t let them hit the gravel and hurt themselves. So, yeah, they jumped off a rood, blind, into a maelstrom of smoke and lightning. And, of course, we had great big pole-vaulting mats down there. They landed safely and we had kokens who ushered them out of the way so the next person could jump {*indecipherable*}. Kokens... something like that would be impossible to stage if you didn’t have a lot of people in black hoods, making sure everyone stays safe and that things work the way they’re supposed to work.

BESTUL: How many people did you have as kokens on an average game?

LEMAN: It depends, but two or three is a high average. If you’re doing a big elaborate thing like that, you need six or seven... Usually, one’s plenty.

BRANNEY: I would like to add, kokens have been employed more by Andrew and his games. I’ve made less reliance on kokens.

LEMAN: ‘Cause we sort of split off at some point—

BRANNEY: Yeah, and there were kind of different styles and types of games... and also, just like making different types of movies or different things appeal to the game writer’s aesthetic. Like Andrew would do his kind of things, and I would tend to do mine, and... So, they’re among techniques used but not necessarily used by everybody.

BESTUL: This is another question that’s probably going to be answered differently, but... I guess it’s a two-part: How long did it often take you to prepare for a scenario and, in addition to that, what kind of things did you do or build in order to prepare for one of these games?

BRANNEY: Yeah, well, prep's a big deal, and it's part of why we don't—

LEMAN: Do them very often—

BRANNEY: Yeah, and in some ways, kind of, *CTHULHU LIVES* has slit its own throat a little bit.

Over time we've become more ambitious, more complex, more realistic, which means it takes more prep, more money, more thought, more time to make them. And now, you know, we're at a point... we're a couple old geezers and can go, "Well, we could put on a *CTHULHU LIVES* game, or we could make a movie." You know, we run a *CTHULHU LIVES* game in which twelve people participate or we can make a movie watched by people all over the world. We can put on a *CTHULHU LIVES* game or I can produce a play that will run for six weeks in L.A. They're big enterprises to do. In the old days—

LEMAN: When we were college students—

BRANNEY: —you could put them together in two to three weeks, and some prep, and you stay up late making a couple props, and do things like that, you know. When we're renting helicopters and making complex dead bodies or, you know, bury some investigative props, the amount of prep time has grown as we've gotten older, and our demands have gotten higher. The college days, we were putting in... there might be one or two games a month, back then... So, it just varies. What was the second part of your question?

BESTUL: The second part was, what kind of things did you build or do in order to prepare for it?

BRANNEY: Wow, you know, that... there's a huge spectrum... But, the first thing was writing it.

And writing a good game is a lot like writing a screenplay, I think, with the exception that is, you don't have to write the dialogue. But you have to write the story. And the story has to have more flexibility—than any other storytelling format I know. 'Cause you don't know what the heroes are really going to do. You give them the setup, and then

go... “The hero will hopefully do this, but might do that, and God help us if he does this.” But you as the person who’s put it on has to be prepared for any eventuality, to go, “Oh, he did the ‘God help us’ thing... how are we going to try to frame the story in a way that will still eventually lead to a conclusion?” We’ve had some great surprises and some great endings because of things going in unpredictable ways, but it requires a kind of storytelling flexibility that no other storytelling format, I know of, does.

LEMAN: It’s also at its best when the story is created mutually while it’s happening, and the players really contribute. The game isn’t particularly successful if the players bring the attitude of “entertain me” to it. If they bring the attitude of “let me do this, too,” when everybody’s participating, then it’s wonderful. But when people expect you to just put on a show for them, then it doesn’t work nearly as well.

BESTUL: You guys had mentioned... Sean had mentioned that there’s really not much in the way of *CTHULHU LIVES* things happening recently. Do you guys do it at all anymore, in the last few years? Do you have any plans?

LEMAN: Yeah. We keep talking about it. We—Sean had written a game that he was prepared to run, but then I had... I got cast in some other show that screwed up the schedule, so that got put on the backburner. We’re actually running, or supervising, I guess... They’re running a game in Sweden in November—

BRANNEY: There’s a Lovecraft convention in Stockholm, in four weeks, called MiskatoniCon. And one of the events in it is a *CTHULHU LIVES*-style role-playing game, which is, the way they play in Sweden is very different—

RANDOM PASSER-BY: Hey.

BRANNEY: How you doin’?

RANDOM PASSER-BY: I keep seeing this “Paulrus is Dead” graffiti around here.

LEMAN: We don’t know what it means, either.

BRANNEY: Yeah... Portland thing, I’m not sure.

So, they asked if we would do one of our-style games there, in Sweden, so... And, of course, we say yes when people ask us things, you know, as we’re sitting here. I took this game that I had written and wanted to do. And it had to be changed in many ways to be suitable for the format of a pay-to-play type thing in Stockholm. But they... It was like, “Okay, these are what we need in terms of locations, this is what we need in terms of props, this is what we need in terms of people.” And people in Stockholm are setting all this stuff up to our requests, and we’ll find out how— We’ve never really tried anything quite like this, so it’s a little experimental. It will play... I think there’s eight different gaming sessions, sold out within the first four-to-five days after they announced it there, so...

LEMAN: I guess we better start working on it.

BRANNEY: So... It’s not dead, but, you know, as we look at our dockets, like, “Wow, it’d be fun to play some *CTHULHU LIVES*,” but it’s like, how do you—

LEMAN: It ain’t never gonna be dead. I mean, it’ll take—it’ll be slower between them, but, believe me, we will never stop playing *CTHULHU LIVES*.

BRANNEY: And the last couple games were some of our biggest games ever, and frankly, some of our best games ever.

LEMAN: We like to top ourselves. We make it harder on ourselves every time.

BRANNEY: Yeah, ‘cause there’s a lot of games you go, “Well, we can do that, but we’ve done that.” So how can we take it to another level, or another place, and another thing? And so we’ve had to do that. But, you know, they can be expensive, they can involve a lot of

people. It's not unusual for a game to have twenty-to-thirty people involved to one degree, or one capacity or another.

BESTUL: Is this thing in Sweden, is this the first time you've had someone request, or has someone actually— Have you had any other requests to help with live-action stuff, or run something with someone?

LEMAN: We've been asked for the last two years to run a game here at the Lovecraft Film Festival.

BRANNEY: In fact, we were supposed to do it this year—

LEMAN: We were supposed to have done one this year, but it just didn't work out. I still hope that we can. I would love to... There's a couple—

BRANNEY: I think we probably will—

LEMAN: There's a couple fantastic locations in the Pacific Northwest I'd love to take advantage of. So, yeah, I'd like to think that we'll do one here in a year or two.

BRANNEY: Yeah, and from time to time. This request from Sweden was very specific that we'd... They'd like to produce one of our-style games—would we write one that they could do. And no one's quite ever made that request before. But we hear from people all the time, you know, in one degree or another. Another guy in Denmark recently was saying, "Could you send me all your notes and all the information on one of your old games, so then maybe I could produce it here in Denmark." You know, and, "Lend me a prop," or, "Tell me how to make it," and stuff like that. And we try to foster other people doing it. It's not like... I don't conceptualize it as "our gig." Yeah, we started this, in a way, but if other people want to play the game we like to play, it—

LEMAN: And that's one reason that we... You know, on the website, we have lengthy descriptions of some of our old games, and even provide PDF versions of some of the props. Go, run it, here's the recording, here's the props, have fun.

BESTUL: How long did an average session of *CTHULHU LIVES* take?

LEMAN: Well, most of the *CTHULHU LIVES* games are played in what we call "scenarios." It's unusual—the typical game consists of several separate scenarios that are played independent of each other. Only two or three times have we done a game that we played beginning to end in one session.

BRANNEY: And that's actually a big difference between our style of play and almost anybody else. Ours is really episodic. We tend to play for four hours, and then two, three days off. And then play for two, three hours. And then a couple days off. And then play for fourteen hours and then, a couple days off, and so... Our stories tend to unfold over time. Most other role-playing groups I know of that, for good logistic reasons, put all the players together in a single space for a block of time, and they play through as one session. And ours also tends to move physical locations, scenario to scenario. So you go to the creepy graveyard and meet the weird gravedigger, and from him you learn that you need to go up the mountain and look behind the thing, that leads you to the warehouse and the fish market. So you're actually physically going from place to place. I don't know of anybody else who really... whose games travel the way ours does.

LEMAN: Most other LARPer's will get a hotel convention room and they'll set up this corner as the warehouse and that corner is the mountain and that corner is the elevator. We just go

get an actual mountain and an actual warehouse and an actual elevator. So you have to physically go from one place to another. The typical game is, like, three or four separate scenarios, played in actually different locations. We've had some... like I said, there were two or three that were just one session, all in one house, in one evening. And then there have been some that have stretched on for months—

BRANNEY: Involving lots of travel, and game sessions have gone overnight. Or even whole weekends.

LEMAN: Usually the most {introspective?} games have been ones that are this total immersion style, where you're literally playing twenty-four hours a day. You're sleeping in character, you wake up in character, and you're just totally immersed in the world of the game, for, like, a week. Those are pretty intense, and we've done four or five of those, and they stand out in everyone's mind.

BESTUL: What does it take to set up, well, even get locales, actual locations?

LEMAN: We use... Your best bet is to use locations that you can get legitimate private access to. So, your house, your mother's house, your friend's house, the garage. Whatever you can get. Then you need... The next best is, like, places you can rent. Sometimes you can use public places, but you have to be very careful what kind of game action you stage in a public place. Safety is always a big concern, scaring people who aren't involved in the game is always a big concern. There have been three or four occasions where we have played a game staged... We had a scenario in a public place, and someone became alarmed, and police were called, and they've always worked out, but—

BRANNEY: No shots were fired.

LEMAN: No shots were fired, no shots have ever been fired. Occasionally, we rent a location if we want it. Sometimes, a location is outdoors, so we go to a park, or up in the mountains when we were living in Colorado, or the beach, places like that.

BESTUL: Were there ever debriefing sessions or just, kind of post-game sessions afterwards?

BRANNEY: Yeah, almost always. A wind-down is a very traditional part. It's—some of the games are very physically and emotionally intense, what the players go through. They're not always that way, but some of the best ones. And they really kind of need that decompression, shake-it-off, "wow, wasn't that great, here, let's have a milkshake and onion rings and relive what, I can't believe what we just did." And so, that's—

LEMAN: Also, these post-game sessions are also great for the NPCs. There's two categories of players in a game, the player-characters, who are the... they don't know what's going to happen 'til it happens to them. And then there's the non-player characters, the NPCs, they're in on the plot, they're playing the bad guys or whatever to help move the story forward. And, usually, the players have done something that the NPCs found incredibly stupid, and the NPCs are just dying to tell them, "Why did you do that?!" So, the post-game session is an opportunity for everyone to just break character and talk about what they did, out of character, and compare notes. And it's always revealing how people have experienced it in a completely different way. Or, someone says, "I almost laughed when you said that thing, and it was great." Yeah, the post-game sessions are almost as much fun as the game itself.

BESTUL: So, did you do a post-game session after each scenario or after each game?

LEMAN: After the *game*.

BRANNEY: Yeah. Usually—

LEMAN: Yeah, you don't break up the story with a post-game.

BESTUL: Going back to one of the first questions we never got around to answering... How did it evolve from its beginnings to the last few games that have been played?

BRANNEY: I think the evolution followed sort of our evolution as people and as artists. We've been doing it so long that we're very different guys than we were twenty years ago, and have different resources, different things are of interest to us. In college, it was pretty easy to wrangle five or six people, and stay up late, and whip up a couple props, and write a simple little story and go put it on... and that was fun. Now, when we're going to do a game, a lot of thought has gone into the story: what it means, what it's about. A lot of them have metaphoric resonances. I mean, a lot of them are much more sophisticated as stories; and some of the early ones, which were just sort of plot. Now a lot of the games have themes and—

LEMAN: And another thing that I love about the games that we've done more recently is, some of them, it's kind of like good series television, where, five years into the series, you understand the character and their own histories so well that you can just use shorthand to tell the story. The audience knows these people, and so, some of the games we've played recently involve characters that have already-established lives and careers as characters. So we can tell stories where Sean has a character who... the character has had previous experiences in the world. And we can run a game where it's drawing on, not only Sean Branney's remembrances, but Sean Branney's character's remembrances as well. And the game is operating on those two levels, simultaneously: real life, and then the story life.

BRANNEY: Meta-life.

LEMAN: Meta-life. And it's where you can interweave those things that, you know, doing this...

There's no other form that I'm aware of, where you can explore things that way that thoroughly. And it's really fascinating.

BRANNEY: And as grown-ups, we have less time and more resources. Before, where we'd find a location and pretend it was the Science Molecular Lab at Cal Tech, Andrew's last game, it was the Science Molecular Lab at Cal Tech. We can wrangle things; we don't pretend it's a helicopter, it is a helicopter. And we couldn't have done that stuff when we were in college. But now, there's more resources, we're better connected, we know more people.

LEMAN: And also, just—I mean, speaking of it in terms of evolution, it is an eternal question of, every time we write a new game, it's like, we want it to be bigger than the one we did last time. So it has its own natural growth thing—

BRANNEY: Yeah. How can it push new ground? 'Cause we've done the one-night games before. We've done the weekend camping games before. So, what is it about this game that's going to make it worth doing, 'cause it takes a lot to do.

LEMAN: Yeah, so you want to challenge yourself to come up with something even better than last time.

BESTUL: Is there a continuity between the games, outside just the fact they're based on Lovecraftian stories or backgrounds?

LEMAN: Some of them.

BRANNEY: Yes and no. Some choose to—Andrew's last game had a lot of tie-ins to games we played a long time before. And that was really great. Some are really completely standalone. Some have been done that have virtually nothing to do with the “true” Lovecraft Mythos. They're sort of in a Lovecraftian world, but there are ones that there's

nothing overtly drawn from something. Almost more like, crime dramas that are very very much in the world of Lovecraft.

BESTUL: Speaking of, going from *CTHULHU LIVES* to the actual HPLHS organization, how did that evolve from—I know that’s probably a vague question with a long answer—

LEMAN: Yeah.

BRANNEY: In the beginning, we started... We were some guys playing the role-playing game, and then we were those people and some friends who were playing the live-action games. And we did that, kind of, for a year or two, before we were finding more and more people were interested in what we were doing, and thought it’d be good to form some sort of club or organization that sort of centered on what we were doing. And we came up with this idea of a society to—and one of the first things that the society did was to start publishing a magazine, to sort of chronicle what we were doing, and let other people know in different parts of the country and the world, you know, what’s going on with live-action role-playing and other things about Lovecraftian history or the Mythos or Edgar Allen Poe or whatever kind of stuff we felt like—

LEMAN: I’ve always been—one of the things that turns me on about this game is the time period that it’s set in, the ‘20s and ‘30s. I hadn’t really paid much attention to it before I started playing this game, but once I did, I was just totally hooked by the historical period. Because it’s this sort of last age of romance and... between the wars when, you know, before there was cynicism and everything went to hell. But still, it was just a different world and it was fascinating. It was a world in which there was still mystery and romance, and you could still believe a politician when he said... whatever he was going to say. So, it was just a fascinating period, and I got hooked on reading all about the real

characters of the age and trying to work up story ideas that would involve stuff from the period. So we used the—we used our magazine as a vehicle to sort of write about some real historical stuff for the benefit of—or, at least we told ourselves—for the benefit of other people who might want to try to incorporate that kind of stuff in their games.

BRANNEY: At that point, there were a couple hundred people involved, in a couple different countries. But the circulation was very small, so we all put it together completely on our own. Should I tell him about the name?

LEMAN: I think you should.

BRANNEY: Let's just say, it's a good anecdote. We were doing a game in Boulder Colorado; a lot of us were students at the University of Colorado. And my friend Phil Bell and I had done—written this game that involved a lot of ninjas. And we were doing a thing, a scenario on the campus of the university which involved some ninjas. And there was a concert or some big event on campus that night. And somebody freaked out seeing ninjas leaping out of trees or whatever, and the next thing we know, boom. In come four police cars, lights on, blah blah blah. And Phil and I are both ninjas. So I'm actually spread-eagle on the back of a police car, being frisked, and the officer's like, "What's going on? Who's in charge?" So people point to me. And he's like, "What's going on?" And I'm like, "We're... the... H.P. Lovecraft... Historical Society... And we're doing a historical simulation." To which he was like, "Well... you shouldn't be doing that sort of thing," and was flummoxed enough by my answer to pretty much let us go. And nobody got finger-printed or booked. But that was the first time that term had ever been used. Being a historical society was really a means to try to keep me out of jail.

LEMAN: It's kind of like, you can get away with almost anything if you're carrying a camera. On a campus, if you call yourself a historical society, you can get access to campus resources and things that you otherwise cannot get.

BESTUL: Speaking of, were there any parallels or connections between your HPLHS activities—or with the other name, on the different campus?

LEMAN: Yeah. In Illinois, my friend Jamie and I called ourselves the Revisionist Historical Society.

BESTUL: Was there any connections or parallels between the activities of either Society, and what you did in college, activity- or study- or research-wise?

LEMAN: Well, I think since that's when it was, that was when Sean and I sort of split up and went to different graduate schools. And he continued to develop the game in his own direction. And I developed the game in my direction, with my friend Jamie. So, our styles sort of split. Jamie and I were, I think, more into the actual historical aspect of the games. One of the games we wrote was about the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. It was set in 1920, when there were still survivors from the Civil War still alive. And there were, like, witnesses that could still be interviewed; they were older, but they could still be interviewed. So, yeah, and we did copious amounts of legitimate research into the assassination of Lincoln, to write into the plot, and weave in all the real— It was about the same time as Oliver Stone's film, JFK, came out, and there was this, you know, conspiracy theory thing in the air. And we thought, what if there was—what about a game about conspiracy theories into who killed Lincoln. {*indecipherable*} stuff, it's a Lovecraftian type of conspiracy. So that was the—we sort of went that direction, and we also worked more with the *kokens*, sort of producing the big spectacle-type games, where

Sean, I think, did more of the smaller, and frankly, probably scarier games. Yeah. Jamie and I tended to produce great big epic kind of things, and Sean, not quite so much. And then, about seven or eight years ago, when I moved to Los Angeles, and we were reunited again for the first time in a long time, all of a sudden we started doing stuff together. And the threads have now been re-woven together.

BESTUL: What kind of, if any, social connections derived, resulted from games, or the organization?

LEMAN: It's— Many of my dearest friends today are people that I played games with in the past. Several of the games that we played, especially in the college years, like Sean was saying, they were physically and emotionally intense. And they really were bonding experiences. Sean and Phil Bell ran a game that was set in Egypt, and we played in the Great Sand Dunes National Monument in southern Colorado. And it was... and, it might as well have actually been Egypt, 'cause there was nothing but sand as far as the eye could see in every direction. In this story, we had gone to this... We were students on this archeological dig, and they had unearthed—they had unleashed some horrible supernatural power at the site they were digging. Everyone was dead and the one survivor had fled into the desert to try to stop the creature, and we had to follow him into the desert. So we were following some guy, trying to find his tracks in the sand, and we had this Egyptian guide who was cryptic and weird, but we had no choice but to trust him and do what he said, 'cause we didn't have any idea. And he made us carry heavy things, and I was one of the players, and I am today, as I was then, out of shape. And we literally hiked up and down over sand dunes for hours. It was the most physically grueling thing I've—well, not the, but one of the most physically grueling things I've ever done. And it

was... there were times in that game where, you know, we're not playing anymore. I am miserable. I am about to drop. I cannot go another step. And it was—brings you to the verge and sometimes past the verge of tears. You just— It's the hardest thing. And it—I'm not playing anymore. This is real. So, experiences like that are so—and the people that you're with who help you get through that, they're going to be your friends for life, whether you want them to be or not.

BRANNEY: Kind of like *Outward Bound* with a plot.

BESTUL: To get back to the question while you were at the sales, I asked Andrew what were some of the parallels and connections between the HPLHS activities and those of your researches or studies or things you did in college?

LEMAN: Well, you took Latin, you took Egyptian—

BRANNEY: Yeah, I learned to read and write and speak in ancient Egyptian—

LEMAN: I took ancient Greek—

BRANNEY: Yeah, I studied a lot of archeology, because I was into it, but it also helped the game and certainly learning to read and write hieroglyphics is useful when you're making stuff like this (*indicates "The Call of Cthulhu" props*) for fun. So that was part of it. In terms of my theatrical studies, was less of an issue as an undergraduate; we played the games and did that. But as... the time I was at CalArts, I learned a lot about producing, and putting on games teaches you a lot about producing. And it's a weird hybrid because producing a game is—it's a lot like producing a film and a lot like producing a play. It's kind of a mix of both in terms of what demands, and... While I was at CalArts, I was applying for grants to do it as an interdisciplinary non-linear theatre project, and so I got permission to use a 400-seat hydraulic theatre, the Disney Theatre at CalArts, to do one

of our *CTHULHU* games, and had a whole lighting team working on it and stuff. It was theatrically spectacular. Which some games have been. Some games particularly, culminating rituals and things like that, that we wanted to make for a good climax of a game, the more theatrical they are, the more intense the players' experience is. It's one thing to walk in, and there's the Pit of the Damned or whatever, but when it's artistically lit and smoke is billowing out and somebody who can—is really a modern dancer, is dancing like a revived corpse, you know, it's that much more intense. So at CalArts, from a production standpoint, I certainly started learning more about how to get crazier shit done. And more complex things, and utilize more broad resources, and that was very helpful. In terms of my training as an actor, I don't think the two really had that much of an impact on each other, playing and acting. But I've also tended not to play in the games as much as I've produced them. If I've run them, I might play a character in them, but...

BESTUL: Speaking of, could you actually elaborate more on what elements of *CTHULHU LIVES* prepared you for doing things such as producing *Shoggoth on the Roof*, producing an album, doing “The Testimony of Randolph Carter,” and “The Call of Cthulhu?”

LEMAN: Managing logistics, getting everyone in the same place at the same time. Making sure everybody's safe, or as safe as you can make them.

BRANNEY: Yeah, mustering resources and living within your means. Or, producing within your means. Which I think is a wildly important part of it all, in that, I run a theatre company in Los Angeles, and have been doing this for a long time and—if you produce way outside what you can afford to produce, it's going to come back to haunt you. Financially, or in any regard, if you can live at the maximum of your means, and continue to grow each time... Now that we've finished “Call of Cthulhu,” and survived within our

means, and once we get it paid for, we'll be in a better position than ever to do another movie and the means for it goes up a little bit. And, I think that's been an important lesson of *CTHULHU* games. And we talk about the big, huge, spiraling things, but our friend, Judy Ruha, who's a PhD from Berkeley, and economist, put on a game, I think the record for—she spent—Less than five bucks, she spent on it, and it was a perfectly fun game.

BESTUL: Which game was that?

BRANNEY & LEMAN: "Daughters of Shub-Niggurath."

BRANNEY: It was great. And you talk about bringing theme into it, for her wanting to do it, it was a very kind of women's-lib *CTHULHU* story about the crazed midwives and dark goddesses and all that, and it was fun. It was great. But it was also done on a very austere budget. But still with creativity and imagination that made it work as an experience {*indecipherable*}, so... I think that's an important part of it. And, again, managing human resources, as well. Finding the right person for the job: and, I need a musician and I need a dancer, I need a lighting guy, I need some actors, I need... And finding them, getting them together, letting them know what to do.

LEMAN: Also, explaining. When you're drafting people to help with this, and they're people who aren't already familiar either Lovecraft or the concept of live-action role-playing, trying to describe what the hell you're doing to someone who doesn't already understand it, can be a challenge. And if you're trying to convince the campus director of activities to let you have a space, and also, you know, tell her what you're doing without seeming completely insane.

BRANNEY: Yeah, like the police. There's lots of people you need to—

LEMAN: You learn a certain amount of diplomacy and—

BRANNEY: It won't serve you in the end to out-and-out lie, but the truth can also work against you. So, you want to find that balance of being able to represent what it is you're doing in a light that will reflect it favorably to the person to whom you're describing it. It's just like the police and the Historical Society. In those contexts, you know, "Okay, then you're just kooky kids and I should let you go, there's no real crime going on here. Just history gone bad." And end it. Versus trying to say, "Well, it's a supernatural horror role-playing thing." You know, just the wrong avenue to take with it.

BESTUL: Did the games or the later productions effect or help in some of the creative aspects as well, such as design, crafting—

BRANNEY: Yeah, prop-making.

LEMAN: Well, to go back to Sean's thing about producing within your means... When your means are limited, you have to come up with ways of achieving the effects you want to achieve, the cheapest possible means of doing it. Anybody can make Cthulhu appear if they've got five million dollars; but how can you do it if you have fifty dollars? That's the question.

BRANNEY: And live in the desert.

LEMAN: —and live in the desert, yeah. So, being perpetually challenged to invent techniques to make effects happen, test of your ingenuity in every hobby, craft, skill you ever thought of, and , where you can scrounge materials, and thrift store shopping, and, you know—

BRANNEY: Yeah, and also, writing. Writing... we talked a little bit about this yesterday, writing for gaming is unlike writing for anything else. Because it has to be written, yet what you write down doesn't mean squat. 'Cause nobody's ever going to read it. But nonetheless, it

has to be conceptualized in an extremely articulated way in order to be able to do it. And a big transition from the early games to the later ones is... I like to think of movie scripts and plays and dramatic writing in terms of subjective and objective stories. The objective one's the plot. What happens, what's unfolding: "Oh, there's a big battle." But the subjective one is, all right, what's going on, emotionally, for our protagonist: "Oh, he's battling the loss of the family farm," or he's going through what he's going through, and at the same time, the Nazi brigade of Panzer tanks is coming, and, boom; when those two meet, that's the climax of the movie. And, in the beginning, our games tended to be purely objectively driven: "Oh, find the lost artifact of Whoozy-Whatzy and bring it back to Whatzy-Whatzy," and it's done. And it doesn't really matter who you are or who the other players are or whatever. And over time, we've realized that there's more—you can get more out of a story by—

LEMAN: A story is really in the subjective half—

BRANNEY: Right, and in the perfect world, it's a balance of both. But the subjective part's really important—

LEMAN: The interplay between them, that's fascinating.

BRANNEY: Exactly. So that, instead of just being some random guy has to go save the world, suddenly, it's this guy, because of things in his past or his family or his relationships, has to do these things under these circumstances. And it became—would make the stories more interesting, the emotional experiences of the players much more interesting. We did one, it seemed straightforward, my—

(to someone else) Are you taking off, John? Take care, it was great to see you. Always a pleasure... Thank you. Shoot me an e-mail on the pirates, John, I'd love to see how it unfolds, I'm really into that, so...

(back to the interview) The one: "My uncle had been kidnapped by cultists." A very straightforward type of Cthulhu game, and a very objective-plot thing, you know: "Got to save my uncle, blah blah blah." And at the end of the game, their uncle in fact was a cultist. And he became the one betraying them, not the cultists themselves. And it was a huge... The climax of that story became a huge emotional shock for the players who were so worried about trying to get their uncle saved, and then so pissed off when they learn that this guy was in fact betraying them, and trying to feed them to the monsters. And that was one of the first games that, at least that I wrote, that really started scooping down into that area in an interesting way, where the last couple games, the subjective lines have become kind of more intense or more interesting, and the more powerful sides of the story. And, yeah, you might be fighting supernatural or occult forces, but why you're doing it, who you are, how is it affecting you, is what really drives the story, and made it good. And in the end, working with these two forces in this arena of storytelling is also, I think, just great practice for writing screenplays or novels or any other type of writing.

LEMAN: In part, because it's a laboratory-type environment, because—although you can write the subjective story 'til you're blue in the face... but somebody else it going to play the part. And they may or may not pick up the emotional cues that you've written.

BRANNEY: Right. They may feel something completely different about what's going on that what you intended them to.

LEMAN: Right. So you write, you craft a character and storyline that, in your mind, has brilliant tension between the past and the present, and the feelings and the facts. But the person who's playing it wants to take it some other direction. So you as the writer are suddenly watching someone else take the idea that you handed them and run in a different direction. And although it's—sometimes that's very upsetting and jarring. It's like, “Wow, I—that never even occurred to me. And look what you can do with the same set of ingredient; you made a completely different cake. And it's awesome!” You know?

BRANNEY: Yeah, we've had some great surprises—

LEMAN: Oh, yeah.

BRANNEY: —and different directions.

LEMAN: Some of the best endings were ones that the guy who wrote it never saw coming.

BRANNEY: And that's part, really, of the excitement. There aren't very many storytelling formats where you—

LEMAN: —the storyteller—

BRANNEY: —doesn't know how it's going to end.

BESTUL: To go back to the question I asked you before, brought up again by Mr. Tynes stopping by, what other kind of contacts have come along, both in the professional realm and this subculture's realm, through the activities of the Society?

LEMAN: We've both worked with Chaosium, Inc., which is the gaming company in Oakland that first marketed *Call of Cthulhu* standard role-playing game. We've both written for some of their supplements. So we've met those guys. We've met the full Lurker film-making community. John Tynes, we wrote a full article for his magazine, *Unspeakable Oath*.

And I went down to Columbia, Missouri, when he was in school there and met him. Of course, all the people who used to subscribe to the old *Strange Eons*, all over the world.

BRANNEY: Yeah, and through... There's an interesting overlap, since Andrew and I moved to Los Angeles, and me and my wife run Theatre Banshee, a theatre company in Los Angeles. And so, a lot of the Banshee people are old CalArts friends of mine who have played in games over the years and now, we go to do a game, and we have a reservoir of professional actors eager to participate: "When are you doing your next game?" "When are you guys doing the next game?" "I want to do one!" "I've never been in one, but I hear how fun they are. I want to be part of one." So, there's the whole kind of theatre-element, entertainment-complex side of things. And then, particularly over the last two, three years, through the Web—our website has really grown over time in terms of what's happened, so we have—it really is a worldwide web. And we have people all over the world who're following what's going on or talking to us about what's going on, or want to produce a game, or want to be involved, or... yeah... Mark Williams.

LEMAN: One of the... Once Sean got to L.A., one of the people that he met was a fellow named Mark Williams, who was a professional make-up and monster-making guy. And Mark ended up making, for one of Sean's games, doing all the special effects, prosthetic make-up and—

BRANNEY: —full-on deep one suits—

LEMAN: —full-on monster suits and everything. So, Sean had access to Hollywood special-effects professionals to do the effects in his game. And it's just like, "Those are... deep ones emerging from the surf of Laguna Beach! Oh my God!" (*J and LEMAN break out in laughter*)

BRANNEY: They really were. Pretty cool (*laughter continues, subsides*). Yeah, it was the same kind of reaction as when I went to the Van Nuys airport to go get in my helicopter. A guy comes up and says, “Hi, I’m John, your pilot. You need to put this helmet on.” “Okay.” Walks me over to the helicopter and says, “Sit down, we’re about to take off.” You know, not really realizing I was really going on a helicopter ride that day. So, yeah, it was a great surprise. So, this kind of upping the ante, this happened over time. While it’s had the drawback of making games fewer and further between, the experiences of the games has just—

LEMAN: And I also think we’re... I don’t know about you (*indicates Sean*), but I think we’re... We may be approaching the point where upping the ante actually means scaling it down a bit.

BRANNEY: Yeah.

LEMAN: Where it’s like, we’ve reached a high point from which, unless we are actually going to win the lottery and have millions of dollars to spend on this, we’ve got to figure out a way to up the ante without upping the budget.

BRANNEY: Or, time is, too, the killer. ‘Cause I’ve got a family, and three businesses, and... I’m busy.

LEMAN: So we’ve got to figure out a way to continue the game experience, growing in intensity and wonder, without becoming bigger and more spectacular, and—

BRANNEY: —lighter. One solution to that, I had—this game we ended up adapting for Sweden, to solve exactly what Andrew was talking about. I wrote, as the Twenty-four Hours of *CTHULHU*. It was done as a twenty-four-hour, non-stop play marathon, involving driving hundreds of miles. All the locations that we do over a three-week game, squished into

twenty-four hours. So that I can turn to my players and go, “Okay, I need you from eight a.m. Saturday, and I give you back eight a.m. Sunday. And you block off twenty-four hours and all you’re going to do is play *CTHULHU*. You need twenty-five bucks, cash, of your own and a driver’s license and, apart from that, you’re mine.” And, because we’re adults and people we’re playing with are adults, and time is hard to get to—

LEMAN: People are booked.

BRANNEY: —do stuff. You know, we’ve had Patrick Stewart, the actor from Star Trek—I went to grad school with his son, Daniel—and we had years of trying to schedule—Patrick Stewart wants to play *CTHULHU LIVES*. And, I think my schedule’s bad, Patrick’s is really bad. And we would try again and again and again, to try and find a slot where we could actually get all the players and Patrick and the locations at the same time. And we never did get a game that Patrick played in, because we never succeeded in the logistics of the challenge.

BESTUL: How did the Black Tentacle Award come about?

LEMAN: That was—was that the first year? We did that from the very first year...

BRANNEY: Yeah, it was... It was. Bunch of games that year.

LEMAN: Yeah, there were a bunch of games that year. We played—when we first started, that first year, we played... like, every month, there was a new game. So we generated a lot of stuff. And, come the end of the first year, I don’t know whether it timed up with the Oscars or what, but, for whatever reason, we thought, “We ought to get together, have a party, and just sort of pat ourselves on the back for being so frightfully clever.” (*laughs*) So, we decided to... What kind of awards can we give ourselves and we came up with the Black Tentacle. Sean, I think, had a toy octopus in the garage, and some leftover molding

from some home-improvement project. So we literally cut the arms off the toy octopus, and glued them to the molding. Made these horribly cheesy trophies. And, yeah, so it was just a sort of a party, compare notes, talk about our experiences. And it was, the party itself was so much fun. It was like, “Okay, well, we’re going to be doing this again!” And it turned into a—it only lasted, like, four years—and we didn’t do anything at all elaborate. Basically, it was just an excuse to see each other and wear fancy clothing.

BESTUL: That kind of wraps up most of the questions I had... Were there any particular games that you wanted to point out, that I really might want to look at? I was thinking, “Daughters of Shub-Niggurath,” the one in Egypt, you guys talked about a lot. What was the one that had the... jumping off the roof?

LEMAN: That one was called... “Dirt?” No, “Dirt” was the Lincoln assassination. It was called... “The Epic (Mistress of Nyarlathotep).” We later would—after it was all over and done with, we re-titled it “Mistress of Nyarlathotep.” But while we were doing it, we called it “The Epic.” It was a huge time-travel game. And it spans— It was— It had many interesting features, one of which was that the player-characters— Usually in-game, the player-characters all start as sort of a team, and then go through the experience together. This one, there were, like, three players who started the game, started the story for different reasons, had different motives. And during the course of the story, they had to either choose to work together to solve a common problem, or not. So there was—one of the players was a gangster, who was trying to get revenge. Some of the players were, the boyfriend of the magician, who was trying to figure what the hell was happening. And some of them were the clients of one of the other character’s, whose life had been just sort of uprooted. So each of the characters had utterly different reasons for being

involved in this story. And they were strangers to each other at the beginning of the story. The act of jumping through that time portal, you know, “Okay, we’re all in the same boat now, so we’ve got to figure out—suddenly we’re in medieval France and we don’t know what the hell’s going on. So we better work together, or we’re never going to find our way back to our own time and place.” So that game was a lot of fun for that reason.

BESTUL: I’d imagine that’d be an insane script to write.

LEMAN: Yeah. *(laughter)* Well, it was also insane, logistically, because we had to—basically, we had to start the game three different times, ‘cause we need to start it from each set of players, independently. So, the opening scenario for this character is completely unrelated to the opening scenario for these characters, and completely unrelated to the opening for these characters. And they only, finally, actually were all in the same room at the same time by two or three scenarios into the game. ‘Cause that’s when the first time portal jump happens. From that point on, they were a group. But for the first part, it was—Jamie and I were trying to run a three-ring circus. It was game happening at three different locations simultaneously. It was crazy.

BESTUL: Yeah, I can imagine.

LEMAN: Yeah.

BESTUL: I’m going to ask Sean that same question when—

LEMAN: Yeah... That game, “The Epic,” I would say. It’s a game— And, for me, I think, the most recent one we did, which was “Mose Ain’t Dead.” That’s the one he talked about with the helicopter and the mummies, just ‘cause that’s... You know, even by our standards, that’s—we went a little overboard. Building an actual 300-yard long symbol in the desert, and burying a mummy a hundred miles into the Mojave—

BESTUL: That's crazy.

LEMAN: Yeah. (laughter)

BESTUL: What about the one where you were using a lot of older continuity, with a character in the modern day?

LEMAN: That's "Mose Ain't Dead."

BESTUL: That's Mose Ain't Dead?"

LEMAN: Yes. Part of what I love about that story, talking about the interplay of the real world, of the life and meta-life... Sean was playing a character, in the story, who's investigating a character that he had played in a previous game. So, Sean's looking at his own past actions through the eyes of this other character. And going sort of on a trip— Sean's going down memory lane, 'cause he was looking at all these things from previous games, but his character doesn't know anything about this. So it's that delicious tension between what Sean's going through and what his character's going through. It's just a lot of fun to mess around.

BESTUL: I was asking Andrew specifically, what games stick out in your minds, especially that you would think I might want to look at? He talked about "The Epic," "Daughters of Shub-Niggurath," "Mose Ain't Dead," "Dirt"...

BRANNEY: What games stick out as being particularly interesting?

BESTUL: Or challenging, or memorable.

BRANNEY: "Egypt" was one of the first really extraordinary games, just because we never physically pushed people to that kind of extreme immersion before. That was the first time we did something like that. And just the collective experience going through that, something so environmentally intense was, great. Another game... that I personally really

liked on a couple different levels was a game called “Perigo,” that my friend Phil Bell and I wrote, that was set in a ghost town in the Colorado Rockies. And it was set in a real ghost town. We scouted ghost towns for months. And the players went up there and, bit by bit, they started finding clues, by going into old buildings and stuff like that, what happened to this town, and started to find the whole history of... It had been prosperous for a while, and then there was a split between the two main miners who founded it. And one guy was becoming more popular, and the other guy was becoming bitter, and it started getting Mythos tie-ins. And, by the time night came, they actually had climbed up a mountain, where a bunch of the mine shafts were. And the mine shafts were still completely open pits dropping down into blackness. And by the time night set in, they’re starting to read some of these documents and journals and stuff they had found, around bonfires, on top of a mountain in Colorado at night. And once they realized what had happened in Perigo—

LEMAN: We wanted to leave. (*laughter*)

BRANNEY: —so everybody fled. And that was the end of the game. And all the players, the investigators, all ran away. They were scared witless. And, we talked about not knowing how a game was going to end, that was not at all what Phil and I had anticipated. Yet, in terms of Lovecraftian storytelling, it was great. You talk about the subjective line of storytelling, it’s like, these people are suddenly going, “If I knew this stuff had happened here and I was really here now, I am out of here. I’m leaving. I’m not staying here.” It’s like when people go into a scary house in a horror story and you go, “Don’t go in the scary house!” And they always do, and it’s really frustrating. These people went—

LEMAN: “Run away!”

BRANNEY: —they all ran away, and it was great, from that standpoint. I always found that game a personal success, to me because—

LEMAN: “I scared them so bad.”

BRANNEY: —it was emotionally violent enough, that the only sane thing to do was flee.

(laughter)

LEMAN: I want to add... one of the documents we found that persuaded us to run away, was in a mineshaft. Most of the mine shafts in the town are vertical drops, but there are some that are more horizontal bores into the mountain. And these insane lunatics hid a human skeleton dressed in rags, clutching a moldy old journal, like, a hundred yards inside the horizontal mine shaft, that we had to spelunk our way into. It was pitch black. The floor of this tunnel was covered—I remember it being about waist high, maybe even higher—in the coldest water imaginable.

BRANNEY: The snow melt-off that never sees the light of day.

LEMAN: Never sees the light of day. It was so cold, and so dark, and you can feel the old rusted railroad tracks beneath your—that’s what you’re following down this thing. And you finally get there, there’s the human skeleton clutching the book. And, you’re really there. So—

BRANNEY: You can see your breath.

LEMAN: It’s like, “Okay, this is scary!” *(laughter)*

BRANNEY: It was a cool experience. And I enjoyed, a few years back, a game called “The Call,” which was sort of my tribute to *X-Files*. It was a very *X-Files*-y kind of game. Set in modern-day, and involved a lot of modern technologies and things, which a lot of our games haven’t sort of allowed for. And I like it because it sort of introduced, sort of

created some new elements to the Mythos, of what happens to you when you think Cthulhu calls to you. What is that about? And some of the things from that have kind of stuck, at least to my personal concept of the Mythos, and the movie, in some ways, and I like that sort of... It was a fun game, anyway, and like... just the way Lovecraft wanted other people to sort of continue to write about the Mythos and things. A lot of things, from... like {S-world?}, has its own Mythos, and ways that spells and magic, and influences of madness, and how things unfold that we get involved in. I like the way “The Call” contributed to the HPLHS mythos.

BESTUL: Actually, now that you mention it, that’s a good question. How did you handle things such as big gun-fights, spell-casting, supernatural—I’m not saying “supernatural,” where you might see a monster, but “supernatural” like, spellcasting, altering reality?

BRANNEY: Couple different techniques. Start with madness Tell him about sanity. ‘Cause a lot of times players would—just like when I talked about “bang bang, you’re dead”—most of the players were aware that sanity—they’re dealing with sanity-threatening situations. And just like you go, “bang bang, you’re dead,” you can go, “Wow, something scary’s happened to you. And the player may choose to decide if it’s too much for them to handle, and their character breaks down. Rarely would we ever force anybody to go insane—

LEMAN: And we really can’t force them— Two specific examples I like to quote. One, Sam’s dream, in the “Egypt” game. When we finally got there, and it was the archeological dig, we were all staying in this trailer-thing by an oasis, by a lake. And we’d had a hellish day, ‘cause we’d found all these dead bodies and our guide had been sucked under the water right in front of us, and we knew that something horrible had happened and we ere

powerless and stranded and frightened, and it was night... But it was night, and we had to sleep, so we all went to sleep. Now, unbeknownst to us, Sean and Phil had told Darrell, who was one of the players, “Let everybody settle down for a little while, and then you’re going to wake up, screaming, from a nightmare. This is your nightmare...” And they describe his nightmare. And he said, “Okay, it’s fine, I’ll do it.” So, we all settle down for a few minutes... except Darrell actually fell asleep. And we all, actually, fell asleep. And Phil and Sean are sitting there, thinking, “Okay, Darrell’s fucked up another game.” He fell asleep before he did his thing. Well, Darrell woke up at, like, three in the morning, remembered he was supposed to do this, and he started screaming. I was sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor—he was sleeping on the couch, I’m sleeping in the sleeping bag on the floor right next to him. It’s three in the morning; the guy next to me is screaming. I was literally paralyzed. I was so frightened, I could not move. There was a gun under my pillow; I couldn’t reach for it, I was literally paralyzed. So it ended up working out even better than they had hoped. Because when he did wake up and scream, everyone was so asleep that it was so shocking, and it was really— And it was the sort of thing where it’s like, “Okay, I just lost five Sanity points.” And I know it. I can’t move, I’m so frightened, that cost me sanity, I know it. Another one... Two other ones. From the very first game we ever played: we were on the trail of this evil cult magician guy— (*interrupted by business*) —From the very first game we ever played, we were on the trail of this creepy magician guy, and we—they tracked him to his last known residence, which was the basement of a boarding house. We go to the boarding house, and we look around, because one of the boarders... and there’s clues that he’s not a good guy. And we see a little, like, cubby-hole in the wall, that’s been filled with foam rubber. And we peel back

the foam rubber. Behind this cubby-hole is a whole ‘nother room. And there’s a light switch just inside the cubby-hole, and I flip the switch, but the light bulb doesn’t go on. And it’s like, “Uh, I think the bulb’s burned out. Can anyone find me a light bulb? I’ll climb in there, and we’ll see what’s going on.” So I get on a chair and I climb through the little cubby-hole and I go through it, and it’s cobwebby and it’s a dirt floor. And they had a fresh light bulb, and I crawl across the floor, ‘cause it’s—the floor is high; it’s not really a proper room, it’s an unfinished ceiling and everything. So I’m kind of crawling over towards the light, and I reach out to take out the old light bulb. And the second I touch it, it goes all aglow. So I pull back. And the second I pull back, it goes off again. It’s just been unscrewed, just enough, it doesn’t turn on. So I screw it in. And it goes on. And the minute I pull back, there’s a dead body. I literally felt the sanity drain out of me. It was—I mean, they couldn’t have, in a million years of trying to stage it that that way, they couldn’t have made it more perfect. Because I did it to myself, you know? It was all me crawling in and doing the thing, and... It was flawless, and it worked so perfectly, and I literally felt myself go a little crazy. And then the only other one I want to talk about is a game, in “The Epic,” that Jamie and I ran. We had a guy who was playing named Joe Foust. And he was playing a character who had been taken over by Yithians—

BESTUL: Okay

LEMAN: —and he was now back in his own body and trying to figure out, “what the hell happened to my life? They destroyed my life for five years, I want to know what happened.” And he ended up reading parts of the Necronomicon. And, completely on his own, without coaching from us, he decided it would be fun if, having read the Necronomicon made him go crazy. So, the more he read, the more weird he became, and

he hot white stuff, and put it in his hair so his hair turned white. And it was just... It was a great example of a player running with the storyline, and making the experience richer for everyone else. Because—their friend they were looking to for help was going crazy, and his hair was turning white in fear from reading this book. And it was—it was like, “Go, Joe! That is exactly the way to do it.” So, as you were asking, “How do you handle sanity?” The way you handle it is, you... in some specific cases, you say, “We’d really like you to go a little insane here.” And you just leave it up to the player to do what they’ve been doing. Or, you get someone like Joe Foust, who takes it on his own initiative to go crazy. And sometimes it ends up that the players—the Keepers who’re running the game, you know, “Wow, Joe’s starting to go crazy, let’s take advantage of that.” And they’ll change the storyline to accommodate the fact he’s now crazy. And that’s where it gets into, you know... We’re all creating the story simultan— mutually. It’s not a question of storytelling, it’s a question of story creation. And we’re all working on it, making it together. That’s when the game is best and... As for gun fights... In the first few games, there was gunplay. And we tried cap guns, we tried squirt guns, we tried various kinds of guns. In the end, we—our way of dealing with gunfire is... you write stories that don’t require gunfire. Because there’s just— Shooting guns is more trouble that it’s worth. When there’s a risk that someone will get hurt or someone will get scared or whatever... For spellcasting, usually, when we have a spell that the players are supposed to throw, they usually find a grimoire or something that very clearly lists, “this is how you do the spell.” So it’s up to them to learn how to do it properly, and to assemble whatever magical items or ingredients they need to get it up. And then it’s up to them to follow instructions. And... We don’t roll dice or anything. It’s a question of, you

know, the Keepers are there, watching, when they throw the spell, and... Usually, the successful casting of the spell is usually necessary for the story to keep moving in the direction that you want it to go. So, they have to fuck it up pretty bad, for you to say, "Sorry, it didn't work." Usually, if they make a reasonable effort to follow the directions, then it works, and we move on with the story. If they totally ruin it, and it's like, "Eh, sorry, that spell didn't work. You can try again, but... You used up all your Magic Powder of ibn-Ghazi, so you'll have to go get more of that," or whatever. So, yeah, that's how we usually do spellcasting. We have occasionally done a thing where we'll have a beanbag or something that you can throw, and, if you're supposed to be—you can throw "rays of paralysis" or something, you throw a beanbag; if you hit them with the beanbag, they're paralyzed. Another technique we've used is the code word. Where, we'll say to a player, "Okay, this game involves code words; if you hear the word 'popsicle,' freeze in your tracks. If you hear the word 'crocodile,' you grow mute with fear." And we usually give them three or four code words, at least two of which are totally bogus; they're never going to be used. 'Cause we don't want to tip them off to what might be coming up. So we'll give them a few, to throw them off the track, and one or two that are legit. And they don't know—they never know when in the story they're going to hear the code words. The only know, "If I hear somebody say 'popsicle,' I've got to freeze." And so they'll be in the middle of having dinner with Aleister Crowley, at a restaurant, and he'll say something like, "Oh, it'd be nice to have dessert. I wonder if they have popsicles." And all of a sudden everybody freezes, or whatever, and then Aleister Crowley can cast magic on them, and they can't do anything about it. So, that's another technique we've used, is

the code word. Where the players know just enough to let us do what we want to do to them, but not enough to spoil the surprise.

BESTUL: How much of the HPLHS is profit, or self-sustaining?

LEMAN: At this point, it sustains itself. That's a very recent development. It was never our intention to be guys who sell T-shirts. That just sort of—along the way, we generated so much content, in the process of making all these games. It's like, "We have tons of cool stuff, and this website, we ought to see what we can do with it." So it just—all this merchandise has been—I think, and frankly, we've both been stunned by the fact that people are interested enough to actually buy it. So, once we realized that, "Wait a minute, we could fund our own ongoing stuff by selling some stuff. We can start pursuing more (*indecipherable*). So, yeah, the HPLHS now has gone from being a hobby that we'll spend a lot of money on, to being a hobby that pays for itself. And it's sort of, it might turn into, one day, actually one of our jobs. Sean can make it his job, I can make it my job. But who knows if or when that might actually happen. But we're very glad that, at least now that if we want to develop a new fun thing, in the end we can do it without worrying too much about the mortgage or the rent or whatever.

APPENDIX F: LETTER TO THE AUTHOR

The following questionnaire was sent by me to both Sean Branney and Andrew Leman, in early January, 2006.

The words in the digital font are the questions I posed, and Leman's responses are the typewritten words that follow. These are photocopies of the original letter.

Follow-up Questions, Thesis on the HPLHS

- How would you characterize Cthulhu Lives in relation/opposition to other live-action role-playing games, such as the Cthulhu Live system?

*Our system is much less rules-based than any other
LARP system I've seen.*

Our system is much less rules-based than any other LARP system I've seen. Our games tend to focus first and foremost on plot, while mostLARPs I've seen are more about character interaction/socialization. We typically go to much greater lengths than other LARPer in finding/developing settings and procuring/building props. We play our games in real locations when possible, e.g., the actual British Museum rather than a hotel room that we're pretending is the British Museum. Most other LARPs tend to take place in one session, where it is common for one of ours to take place over the course of several sessions spanning many days of real time. Unlike Cthulhu Live and most other LARPs I know of, there is no formal conflict resolution system in Cthulhu Lives! Combat situations are role-played through, not abstracted. Consequently, our games do not stress or even feature much physical combat.

- How did the game at MiskatoniCon turn out? What might the implications for future games of Cthulhu Lives be, based upon this one (both in terms of creation and prep, as well as the plausibility of it as a product/service)?

It was both fraught with problems and highly successful. Due to poor communication with our Swedish counterpart, the props and locations for the game were prepared in great haste at the very last minute. He thought we were making props and bringing them with us, and we thought he was making props and they would be waiting for us. Consequently, nobody made any props until we arrived in Stockholm, and we spent the first few days of our trip feverishly writing character dossiers and preparing prop documents. The props we had built in advance were in the duffelbag which SAS lost, and we did not have them and couldn't replace them in the time available, so we altered the storyline to compensate. Our Swedish collaborator had found some truly excellent locations, however, including an old bomb shelter which was just a huge empty cave with an enormous rusted steel door. Very dark and very effective.

The game was played four times: once in English, twice in Swedish, and once in Finnish. I ran one of the Swedish sessions, even though I don't speak that language. Luckily for me it seems that everyone in Scandinavia speaks fluent English. The characters spoke to each other in Swedish, and to me in English (I was playing a British character). It actually worked to their advantage, as it compelled them to explain all their plans to me before doing anything, which gave them an extra chance to think about what they were doing. The players were all excellent role-players, and my session was highly successful. They all really embraced the terrible options we had given them, and let the emotional weight of their decisions sink in on them. I heard the other sessions were also successful, although I did not attend them personally. The game worked quite well as a portable, playable event, and it's encouraging. I hope to play the game in the US with American players at some point.

•What is the process of character creation in Cthulhu Lives? There's a brief explanation in the *Unspeakable Oath* article, but how often does the Keeper assign the PCs, and why will he or she do that? How much interaction does the Keeper have with the players in creating the characters, and has a player ever changed something (big) before the game?

In our early years, the Keeper would never interfere with character creation. Since we play live and without character "stats", characters generally do not possess abilities that the players themselves do not possess. No one has a "read Latin" skill number, for example. Either you can actually read Latin or you can't. Likewise, your character can only run as fast as you yourself can run. In later years Keepers would assign characters, or character attributes, when they were important to the story of the game. In the game "Dirt", for example, the characters were the reincarnations of real historical figures, so we gave the players certain character attributes which would help them make that connection. If I have written a game in which the ability to pick a lock will be critical, I give one of the characters the ability to pick a lock by giving the player the actual key to the lock. Character creation in Cthulhu Lives! is all about personality and history, not about skills or abilities. Usually the Keeper stays out of it unless there's some critical plot necessity to get involved. I can't think of an occasion where a player made some major character change before a game.

•When the organization split into the HPLHS and RHS, how did the game develop in these separate environments? (This was discussed in brief in the interviews, and the interviewer, much like Guildenstern, forgot to delve.) At what point did the two reunite to become one, and what would you say is the primary goal of the HPLHS in its current incarnation?

The split was more to do with geography than anything else, and I think both groups developed along much the same lines. Sean took advantage of the resources available to him in California, while I took advantage of what was available to me in Illinois. Sean met Hollywood special effects experts and had help from them. I met people who did Kabuki theatre and borrowed ideas for staging from them. Our games continued to be story-driven and light on formal rules. Sean did a larger number of smaller games, and I did a smaller number of bigger games. Most of the RHS games involved real historical characters and/or settings, and Jamie and I did a lot of real research in preparing them.

The two didn't "reunite" so much as the RHS just kind of faded away after Jamie Andersen and I went our separate ways. When I moved to Los Angeles and Sean and I were together again, new life was infused into the dormant HPLHS, and with the launch of our website we were fully back in action.

I would say our primary goal now is to continue to bring Lovecraftian fun, in many different forms (games, movies, music, publications, props) to an ever widening audience.

•What's next for the HPLHS? For Cthulhu Lives?

We have several ambitious projects on the drawing board at the moment. We're planning a second album of Solstice carols for this winter. We are working on our massive 17th-century Necronomicon. There's volume 2 of the prop documents collection. And we're developing two new film projects: a feature-length "talkie" of The Whisperer in the Darkness and an all-stop-motion animated Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath, inspired by the work of an artist we met in Stockholm. For Cthulhu Lives! we will continue to play as time permits. We have had several ideas for ways to evolve it. I'd very much like to run the Stockholm game for the HPL Film Festival lurkers at some point.

•How self-sustaining is the HPLHS? If it is completely, when did it reach that point?
How does the merchandise help with production costs, whether through online or in-person sales?

With the unanticipated success of "The Call of Cthulhu" the HPLHS has recently become entirely self-sustaining. In fact, we have been compelled to hire an employee to keep up with things. Merchandise helps with production costs by providing them in their entirety, at this point. Website sales have been good, and we now have retailers in various parts of the world who sell our stuff directly in stores. We have recently been talking about a distribution arrangement in the UK, and we have several retailers in Scandinavia. It's insane.

•Is there a sense of joy seeing Shoggoth on the Roof finally get to production week? How did it work in Swedish? How would you review the production? Is it an example of a screwed-up American legal system that this show had to be staged on another continent (and in another language) in order to finally open? Is this set of questions less for my thesis, and more for my curiosity?

Although the experience was not without its disappointments, on the whole it was a true delight to see ASOTR on stage at last. It worked in Swedish extremely well, and it's crystal clear that an English production would be extremely entertaining. We published a review of the show on our website, and you can find it at www.cthulhulives.org/Shoggoth/index.html. We videotaped the show but haven't had time to edit together a finished presentation.

And yes, it is regrettable and ridiculous that the show had to have its premiere in another country.

•The two of you did some lecturing at MiskatoniCon. You wouldn't happen to have these lectures in an easily-transmittable format (i.e. Word)? If so, would you have the time to send them?

They weren't so much lectures as an extemporaneous stand-up routine. Luckily for everyone, no copy survives.

Okay, at this point I'm getting a little silly. I thank the both of you for your responses, and I'll probably generate more questions after I turn in the first draft. Sorry. I'm inquisitive like that. Such questions will probably be sent via e-mail. I'll try not to flood your inbox. Again, congrats on Slamdance, and good luck in Utah.

-J.

Sorry it didn't occur to me until now to clean my typewriter. My apologies for all the clogged "o"s and "e"s in the foregoing.

AHL

APPENDIX G: CONSENT FORM



Bowling Green State University

Department of Theatre and Film
338 South Hall
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403-0236
Phone: (419) 372-2222
Fax: (419) 372-7186

Greetings. My name is J. Michael Bestul, and I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). I am conducting a study for fulfill my thesis requirement for a Masters of Arts in Theatre from the Department of Theatre & Film at BGSU. The study will seeks to examine the way that leisure and amateur performance interact with skills useful in non-leisure settings. More specifically, how does a group doing live-action role-playing games (such as the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society) develop into a producer of musicals, films, and props? Is it coincidental that many people involved with this group's "hobby" have professional careers in the performing and visual arts? What is the measurable connection between hobby and career/art? It is my belief that the potential benefits of this study will not only answer a call for such research on non-typical performance, I think it would be beneficial to simply document such a "potent medium for intellectual and psychological exploration" (as stated on the Society's website) in an academic context.

Along these lines, I am requesting to interview you for this study, and to use any Q&A sessions from the showings of "Call of Cthulhu". These will be recorded by audio, and the responses used to inform the conclusions I draw in the study. I estimate that the initial interview will take approximately one hour. There may be subsequent sessions over the course of the next half-year where I will ask, via e-mail or phone, follow-up questions or clarifying questions (be aware that if follow-up is done through e-mail, that e-mail correspondences are not 100% secure). I would not expect the total time commitment to be more than three or four hours over the next half-year. The anticipated risks to you in this study are no greater than those normally encountered in daily life.

As part of the study, I am asking to be able to quote your responses and identify you along with your responses. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you can refrain from answering any questions without penalty or explanation. You are free to withdraw consent and to stop participation in the project at any time. If you decide to participate and change your mind later, you may withdraw your consent and stop your participation at any time without penalty or explanation. In addition, you have the right to have all questions concerning the study answered by me. Add any point, you may request a summary or copy of the results of the study.

If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at home (419.352.6754) or my office (419.372.3302), or be e-mail (bestul@bgsu.edu). You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Jane Barnette, at 419.372.7173 or (bjane@bgsu.edu). If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at 419.372.7716 or (hsrb@bgsu.edu).

I thank you for your consideration of my request.

J. Michael Bestul

By completing and returning this document you are indicating your consent to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

(Signature of participant)

(Date)

APPROVED - BGSU HSRB
EFFECTIVE 10/10/05
EXPIRES 10/15/06