



Preserving Player Surprise in a Solitaire Investigative Adventure

So much of the Cthulhu Mythos is well known to players of Lovecraftian RPGs that preserving mystery in an adventure can be difficult. Even if the PCs are unaware that Deep Ones are behind the series of disappearances in the sleepy hamlet of Martin's Beach, their players have it figured out from the first set of slimy wet footprints. Add to this the additional difficulty of preserving player surprise when playing solo, and running investigative horror scenarios starts to look fruitless.

Now, you could use a random creature generator of some sort (Silent Legions has a good one), and roll for each Clue on one of the tables and determine the nature, qualities, and motivations of the randomly-generated horror as you play, but sometimes you want to play a game investigating the established monsters and cults of the Cthulhu Mythos.

These rules are my proposed solution. Note that whilst I wrote them specifically for Lovecraftian gaming, they should work with little modification for almost any horror, mystery, or investigation scenario. I presume that you have some usual method of running solitaire RPGs with a GM Emulator and Oracle, so the specific relating to most of the game play are left up to you. I have not even included a random Clue generator, though I will suggest some in the appendix. This is simply a method for interpreting the Clues without having to go into "GM-Mode" to do so.

The Rules

Before starting the first scene of the adventure, pick 3-5 possible Ultimate Horrors. These can be monsters out of the rulebook, Outer Gods, Terrible Secrets, murderers, or any combination that suits you at the moment. Then begin playing normally, until your PC finds the first Clue.

Each Clue will grant a number of points to one or more of the Ultimate Horrors on the list you put together. Assign points according to the following schema:

- only vaguely related +1
- related +2
- if only one entry on the list is possible +3
- if all or none, +0
- if none seem likely, but one is definitely improbable -1

If all of them are equally likely, or none seem likely but neither are they particularly counter-indicated, then the Clue is probably a red herring.

For example, say that you have compiled a list of three potential Ultimate Horrors: a Cthulhu cult, Hounds of Tindalos, and a family connection to the Deep Ones. During the game, your PC finds a letter written by their weird great-uncle St. John. Your random generator for this Clue comes up with 'boat'. For the narrative, you decide that it is the last letter uncle St. John sent before he died in a(n alleged) yachting accident. Boating seems like it might point to both Deep Ones and possibly Cthulhu. Neither is a particularly strong indicator, so you assign +1 point to both. Your PC makes another roll, and realises there is another Clue in the substance of the letter, which discusses the recent excavation of a tholos tomb on Crete. Ancient tombs don't particularly suggest any of your possible horrors, but the shape of the tomb -- a beehive -- doesn't offer any angles from which a Hound of Tindalos might appear, so one point is taken away from its total. Of course, it equally could have occurred to you (as it did to me as I was typing out the example) that the shape of the tomb was chosen as protection against the hounds, in which case it would be worth +3.

Interpretation of the Clues shouldn't take too long. Don't agonise over your decisions, just go with whatever comes to mind first. This isn't an exact science. If you feel a clue could go either way, it's best to just stick with the first idea that popped into your head. Similarly, don't go back and adjust points from previous clues if other ideas about them occur afterwards.

If multiple clues are found during a scene, total everything up together at the scene's end, rather than pausing the game each time a Clue appears. Negative point totals are possible (especially early on) but have no particular significance as the totals are only relative to one another. However, if lowest total is ever 5 points less than highest, that entry is removed from the list.

Note also that the List and totals are to be treated as any other GM emulator tool, so your PC won't necessarily be making any connections, unless they succeed in a Cthulhu Mythos roll (or Occult skill roll, etc. depending on your game system) in the usual way.

Reaching the End

There are a few options for using the points to determine the Ultimate Horror. Pick one of the three before starting. Should your adventure proceed in such a way that you need to know what's going on before the investigation has reached a logical end, simply institute option 3.

Option 1: The simplest is to decide that the first total to hit 10 is the winner. You can pick greater or lesser numbers than 10 depending on the length of game you want. In case of a tie, you could roll a die to decide which it is, combine the results, or decide that the next one to get the higher total wins.

Option 2: The second alternative is to base the game on a set number of clues, and whichever total is highest when all the clues have been found decides the Ultimate Horror.

Option 3: The third alternative is to simply play until it becomes necessary to the game to know what the Ultimate Horror is, for instance, if it moves directly against the PC, in which case the highest total at that point decides it.

In the second and third alternatives above, instead of simply going with the highest total, you could use the proportions to decide by a die roll. For example, if your totals were Cthulhu cult 7, Hounds of Tindalos 5, Deep Ones 6, you could roll 1d20: 1-7 Cthulhu, 8-12 Hounds, 13-18 Deep Ones, 19-20 roll twice and combine results (or simply re-roll).

Additional Options

Multiple Schemata: You could have Clues giving points to more than one List. For instance, you could keep a tally of Ultimate Horrors and a separate, secondary tally of family members or organisations, and have the Ultimate Horror relate to whichever person/group is ahead in the ranking at the time of revelation. Or perhaps there's more than one involved, in case of a tie.

Reverse Cluedo: Each potential horror starts with 10 points. For each clue found, removes a single point from each total to which it could not logically refer. Last one with points remaining is the culprit. In case the last two go out from the same Clue, roll 1d6: 1-2 A, 3-4 B, 5-6 Both.

Usage Dice: Start each at 1d10. Roll each die every time a Clue is found, but before determining the nature of the Clue. Interpret the specific Clue to fit every entity that rolls 1-2 on their die; these also drop down to the next smallest die size (d10>d8>d6>d4). When a 1d4 comes up 1-2, you've discovered the Ultimate Horror. If two go at once... combine as above.

Appendix – Clue generators

Mythic / Location Crafter: Treat each clue as a Complex Question (What is the clue?). The Location Crafter (and Mythic Variations 2) have Descriptor tables in addition to the Action/Subject Event Meaning tables. If you are already using Mythic as your GME & Oracle, this has the obvious advantage of not adding to the number of charts you need for play. Its disadvantage is the need for more interpretation.

d30 Sandbox Companion: If you prefer more concrete clues, there are a few tables which are well-suited for just that. The Adventure Generator Tables I&II (especially the sub-tables Location, Location Feature, Phenomena, and Artifact/Relic) are my usual go-to for clues, as they are mostly all in one place (over two pages) and provide a decent variety. For more options, the Expanded Heraldry Charges/Sigils and Tavern Name Generator tables have lists of all sorts: colours, objects, weapons, archetypes, etc. There are a few sub-tables with fantasy monsters that are not suitable for all horror genres, but these are easily bypassed.

Labyrinth Lord Advanced Edition Companion: The Random Tables section near the end of the volume (pp 147-150) has a lot that could be useful: Atmospheric Details, Random Sounds, Miscellaneous Room Contents, Random Features, Random Characteristics, and possibly even Specialty Room Furnishings. It's also a free download.

Bibliomancy: Open a book to a random page, and use the phrase, sentence or passage on which your finger alights as the oracular pronouncement. Vergil and the Bible are traditional, but any book will do if it's genre-appropriate. You probably should not use any actual Lovecraft stories, as pointing to the name of one of the horrors on your list rather defeats the exercise. This method has the same disadvantage as interrogating a regular Oracle, interpretation. But consulting a musty old tome might just add to the play experience.