

THE UNSPEAKABLE OATH™

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THE DREAD PAGE OF AZATHOTH

I first encountered *The Unspeakable Oath* in 1991. Issue 3 sat on a game store shelf in Birmingham, Alabama. It was an eye-catcher. Gorgeous black line art by Blair Reynolds, three cultists with bloody robes and knives staring thoughtfully out; goldenrod cardstock cover wrap, staple-bound, very do-it-yourself.

Those cultists amazed me. You could tell they weren't just anonymous mooks, easy pickings for heroic investigators; they had depth. They had names and ideas and plans.

Underneath them, the logotype: "... for the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game."

That cinched it.

I hadn't even opened the cover.



I had been a *Call of Cthulhu* fanatic since the game first appeared. A D&D buddy ran that first game and I was the sole player; I solved the case and then my character was betrayed and murdered.

I was 13 years old and I was hooked. Fantasy gaming never quite measured up again.

In high school my friends and I played a long campaign, taking the same core group of investigators, minus a casualty here and there, entirely through *Terror From the Stars* and *Shadows of Yog-Sothoth*. Hardened veterans, we charged into *Masks of Nyarlathotep* and made it through two scenarios. Then came our private apocalypse: midnight on a cold little island, alien gods seeping down from the sky. Those long-running investigators died to a man. Only one newcomer escaped—and he had murdered one of the veterans.

It takes a certain kind of gamer to go through that kind of punishment and come out begging for more. Most shake their heads and ask when they can get back to the good, clean heroism of a game with affordable resurrection. But my friends and I loved it. The risk itself was a thrill.

And as for heroism—well. As Ken Hite has elsewhere observed, *Call of Cthulhu* is the most heroic roleplaying game ever played. It's heroic precisely because of the things that make it so horrifying. It's a game where ordinary men and

women see the worst that the universe has to offer, incarnated in mind-blasting alien flesh, and try to face it down.

That's heroism.

I've been playing it for nearly 30 years and it still gives me chills.

I could tell right off, the guys behind *The Unspeakable Oath* were my kind of gamers. They designed scenarios and adventure ingredients with rich details and well-researched backgrounds. They looked for villains with real character, whose motivations, even when insane and irredeemably evil, made a certain kind of pragmatic sense. They rejected the easy answers of the Cthulhu Mythos authors who provided benevolent, or at least accessible, alternate gods as foils to the awfulness of the Great Old Ones. And yet they had a wicked sense of humor.

They clearly adored the same mix of careful investigation and crazy, unpredictable action that so many of us loved in *Call of Cthulhu*—and in emphasizing meaningful characterization they explored the game's true depths.



By the time *The Unspeakable Oath* walked or stumbled to its long hiatus in 2000, I had been working with its publisher, Pagan Publishing, for a few years. I proofread and playtested some of their books and contributed a piece or two; I ran their Delta Green website.

It wasn't long before I partnered up with Dennis Detwiller, Pagan's art director, to form Arc Dream Publishing. Dennis and the Pagan crew had applied their unique sensibilities to World War II and superheroes for the roleplaying game *Godlike*, eventually published by Hobgoblynn Press. After Dennis and I secured *Godlike's* publishing rights and stock from Hobgoblynn it became Arc Dream's flagship property. Years trickled by; we made more games; we were nominated for awards despite barely making a ripple in the industry at large.

Everything Arc Dream did was informed at some level by *The Unspeakable Oath*. *Godlike* and *Wild Talents* are about the nature and risks of heroism, not just the glory of superpowers. *Monsters and Other Childish Things* features ordinary kids with ferocious, often downright Lovecraftian

monsters as their friends and protectors; monsters that give them power but put their friends and loved ones in danger. It's funny and horrific by turns. We never would have made those kinds of games if *The Unspeakable Oath* hadn't convinced us that kind of gaming were possible.

A few years ago Arc Dream got together with Pagan to resurrect another *Call of Cthulhu* property that had seemingly slipped off to the Dreamlands, one that had its roots in *The Unspeakable Oath*: Delta Green. Arc Dream put *Delta Green: Eyes Only* together and Pagan published it, and then we did the more ambitious *Delta Green: Targets of Opportunity*, which came out this year.

Somewhere in there, Dennis and I started talking about *The Unspeakable Oath*. After Delta Green, resurrecting the *Oath* didn't seem quite so daunting.

We talked about it with Scott Glancy at Pagan, and with John Scott Tynes who founded the *Oath*; they were pleased with the work we'd done for Delta Green; and then the deal was done.

At one point I remember it suddenly sinking in: *Holy shit. We're bringing back the Oath!*

I may be running the thing now, but I'll always be a giddy fan at heart.

December 2010 marks the 20th anniversary of the first issue of *The Unspeakable Oath*. John Scott Tynes was a college student when he put that first issue together, writing most of it himself. He kept it going for seven years, then a break, then a last issue—and then a decade's silence until today. And after all this time, countless gamers still remember the *Oath* with love. John should be proud as hell.

Roleplaying games have seen a lot of changes in the 20 years since *The Unspeakable Oath* first appeared, and in the 10 since it last appeared. Several new games have covered the Cthulhu Mythos.

Ken Hite's *Trail of Cthulhu*, a licensed variant on *Call of Cthulhu*, moves the investigations at the heart of the game away from randomized skill rolls. Instead it uses pools of skill points under the player's control; spend the right kind

of point at the right time and gain the clue. In play it has a very different feel from *Call of Cthulhu*, heavily focused on detective work and careful discovery.

There's been *Realms of Cthulhu*, an alternate version of *Call of Cthulhu* for the pulp action game *Savage Worlds*; *CthulhuTech* with a science fiction take on the Mythos; *The Laundry*, adapting Charles Stross' excellent stories of espionage, bureaucracy and the Mythos; at Arc Dream we adapted the *Godlike* and *Wild Talents* rules to Mythos horror with the free game *Nemesis*.

And so in *The Unspeakable Oath* we'll provide resources for many Cthulhu Mythos roleplaying games. But the essence of the *Oath* will always be the game that inspired it.

It's true that games with more streamlined character generation and more tightly focused mechanics can make *Call of Cthulhu*'s decades-old rules and endless list of skills feel a little fusty and crusty. But the game has been around this long because it works. It's not for everyone, but it's a game that does what it's trying to do.

In *Call of Cthulhu* there are no sure things. At best there's only a hint in a grimy old book that you might not even notice on the shelf. The spasmodic pull of an unfamiliar trigger. A stumbling flight from stinking shadows to the false light of day. More likely it's death that you never saw coming, or a realization that leaves you utterly, permanently unhinged.

There's no control to be had, narrative or otherwise. Success, when you manage it, is a thrill. Madness and mayhem are often much more fun.

Join us and see if you agree.

SHANE IVEY, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Postscript: Longtime readers may notice there's a section missing in this issue: *Scream and Scream Again*, the letters column. With so many years gone by between issues it didn't seem feasible to collect comments on the last one to be published. We'll most likely see *Scream and Scream Again* in issue 19. See the masthead for our mailing and email addresses.

A TALE OF TERROR: MR. POPATOV

By JOHN SCOTT TYNES

In the course of an adventure, the investigators interview a witness to some recent event. This witness is of negligible value to the adventure, offering only a few corroborating details. But the interview with the witness is a different matter.

The man's name is Josef Rebane. He is eighty years old and hard of hearing, but mentally and verbally sharp. Josef is Estonian and came to this country forty years ago. He is a puppeteer.

The interview is in his home, a run-down cottage. His home is crowded with old furniture, relics of larger homes now crammed into this little space. In the living room is his red-velvet puppet theatre and hanging on the wall behind it is his collection of marionettes.

One marionette, a goat named Mr. Popatov, is suspended



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from the top of the puppet theatre so that he dangles within the proscenium. Mr. Popatov is a black goat with a broad smile.

The interview goes uneventfully, with some light comedy provided by Josef's hearing problem. The investigators notice, however, that Mr. Popatov is never still. He rocks gently back and forth, somewhat irregularly, and several times he turns slightly as if facing one investigator or another or Josef himself.

Of course, it's a creaky, unsteady old house. Even shifting in your chair is enough to make the tea cups Josef serves rattle in their saucers. When the investigators get up to leave, their footsteps make Mr. Popatov jiggle.

That night, the investigator with the lowest Sanity has a vivid dream. He's back in Josef's house but now he realizes that Josef himself is a marionette being operated by slender black threads—threads that drape across the floor and terminate in a coil around Mr. Popatov's black cloven hoof.

POSSIBILITY 1: NOTHING SCARY HERE

If the investigators pay another visit, they find the house locked and dark. Neighbors report Josef hurriedly left with his puppet theatre. He does not return during the current scenario. Peering in the windows, the investigators can see Mr. Popatov sitting in Josef's chair. He does not move and should the investigators break in, Mr. Popatov is nothing but a puppet.

POSSIBILITY 2: THE RELIC

Mr. Popatov is a reliquary for the teeth of a powerful Estonian cultist of Shub-Niggurath. The spirit of the cultist can possess Josef whenever needed as long as he is physically present. Now that Josef is old, the spirit is looking for a new owner for Mr. Popatov. Scattering the teeth in barren soil will break the spirit's connection forever.

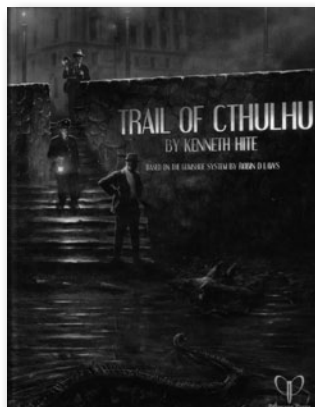
POSSIBILITY 3: ON THE ALTAR

Mr. Popatov is soon to be sacrificed by the rest of the puppets in Josef's theatre in a black mass to be held in some ominous outdoor spot. Josef will carry his theatre there, lay Mr. Popatov atop a stone, and then manipulate the other puppets as they enact the ritual and cut Mr. Popatov's strings. Josef's planning and field trips for this event will provide plenty of fodder for watchful investigators. Should he succeed in sacrificing Mr. Popatov, Josef will die and his soul transferred into the now liberated and living body of Mr. Popatov.

THE EYE OF LIGHT & DARKNESS

BY VARIOUS CULTISTS

Reviews are rated on a scale of one to ten phobias. Six or more means it's worth the money; at ten it's insanely terrific.



TRAIL OF CTHULHU

PELGRANE PRESS, \$39.95

BY KENNETH HITE

REVIEWED BY MATTHEW POOK

Call of Cthulhu is not perfect. It quantifies the Cthulhu Mythos, giving it numbers and making it knowable. Its skill system can result in the investigators missing clues and thus stalling a scenario. It can be difficult to explain character motivation for investigating the horrors of the Mythos.

Trail of Cthulhu is a licensed version of *Call of Cthulhu* from Pelgrane Press that addresses these issues. Written by Ken Hite (a member of the editorial board of *The Unspeakable Oath*), it uses that publisher's GUMSHOE System, Robin D. Laws' rules that shift the emphasis from finding clues to interpreting them. Hite adds Drives to explain investigator motivation. By discussing entities of the Mythos often in contradictory terms, not giving them stats beyond the Sanity loss they inflict, and by moving the game forward into the Desperate Decade of the 1930s, Hite makes Lovecraftian investigative horror unknown once again.

The first big difference between *Call* and *Trail* is that *Trail* asks which mode of play you prefer. It offers two, Purist or Pulp. Inspired by the majority of Lovecraft's stories, the Purist mode has players and Keeper play out tales of intellectual and philosophical horror, doomed to a searing understanding of the cosmos. The Robert E. Howard-inspired Pulp mode is more physical, its protagonists ready with two guns blazing. The modes show in the Occupations: Author and Antiquarian are Purist while Alienist and Private Investigator are Pulp. In the Drives, "Sense of Adventure" is Pulp, "Artistic Sensibility" is Purist. Pulp mode allows "Bullet Resistant Clothing" and Purist mode calls for Ability caps.

Rather than traditional attributes and skills, in the GUMSHOE System characters are defined by two Ability types: Investigative (divided into Academic, Interpersonal, and Technical) and General. Both Ability types are represented by pools of points. Investigative Ability points are spent to acquire clues while General Ability points are spent to modify the die rolls in actions such as Driving, Fleeing, and Scuffling. Notably, both Health and Stability are General Abilities, as is the signature Sanity Ability, their points spent to save against taking physical or mental damage respectively.

While the use of point pools adds a resource management aspect, it shifts the focus to understanding clues rather than obtaining them, because Ability points are spent to gain extra information about a clue. If an investigator has an appropriate Ability, then he always gets the basic clue itself.

Alongside a re-examination of the Mythos, its entities, and its tomes, Hite provides a good overview of the 1930s, complete with new cults, some of which have a political aspect. In addition to the Brotherhood of the Yellow Sign and Yithian agents, he details Germany's Ahnenerbe and Japan's Black Dragon Society. Their inclusion nicely leads into the overview of the "Dirty Thirties," a decade of famine, poverty, racism, totalitarianism (described as mankind's own "Creeping Order"), and war.

Where in *Call of Cthulhu* an investigator simply loses Sanity, in *Trail* he can lose Sanity and Stability. Stability measures an investigator's immediate mental state and can be relatively easily recovered, while Sanity measures acceptance of the universe's true nature. Sanity is still lost for reading Mythos tomes, but is also lost for suffering a Mythos Shock (which occurs when a Mythos encounter drives an investigator's Stability below 0), and, more radically, for using the Cthulhu Mythos skill to understand reality. Thus not only is learning Mythos knowledge dangerous, but so is using it, making it a more active decision than merely rolling the dice as in *Call of Cthulhu*. Similarly, casting spells in *Trail* is more dangerous, incurring a Stability check, a potential Mythos Shock, and potential health loss, so even for an insane sorcerer spells are still perilous.

Besides excellent advice for the Keeper on creating and running a *Trail* game, "Campaign Frames" offer alternative approaches and themes that could be pitched as television series. There are three samples. Project Covenant's "The Untouchables meets Delta Green" or "The