

Longevity & Sanity: Two Bad Character Traits?

BY PHILIP BELL



Could it be that my CTHULHU LIVES character has survived way beyond his life expectancy? Would seeing my best friend's brain boil (not to mention a sundry Cthulhoid beasties) really drive my character insane? Aye!

The topic is sensitive and the answers are hard to believe, but it is high time that character longevity and sanity be discussed. In the "old school" of character making, players would create their characters with the intention of keeping them around forever, or until the Great Old Ones were finally thwarted, 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.

As a result of most of the players having a hard time staying in character for extended periods, the long-lived characters took on many of the personal qualities of the player. This takes away from the role-playing quality of the game and limits character diversity.

I propose that we look back to Lovecraft not only for the roots of game horror, but also in search of better, more appropriate character types. The characters of Lovecraft were scholarly, intelligent folk with the bad habit of having an insatiable curiosity for the bizarre. Primary in Lovecraft's mind was the "atmospheric effect" to bring forth the "breathless and unexplainable dread" in his stories. He relied upon atmosphere, and not characters, to relate the stories to the readers. The characters were secondary, only to act as the means by which the "atmospheric effect" comes about. His method of descriptive scenes was all that was necessary to set the proper, sepulchral mood. In the scheme of things, people are naught in comparison to Azathoth, Cthulhu or any other deific entities.

The atmosphere of game horror could be enhanced if players steered away from the Indiana Jones type of hero and leaned towards the Randolph Carter type of investigator. CTHULHU LIVES needs fear to be less active and more psychological because it takes the psychological involvement of the character to create true horror in the player.

The sanity losses incurred when a character sees a mind-wrenching sight should be such so as to wrench his (or her) mind. How would a person truly respond to the sight of Byakhee attacking their friend? Insanity. There is no shame in committing your character to an asylum. For realism's sake it is very much preferred as opposed to being undaunted by any circumstance. Perhaps we have made insanity our enemy — and have thusly denied its existence — as a reaction to the *Call of Cthulhu* paper game where sanity is a rare commodity. However, insanity can be used as a method of self-expression as well as a means of character disposal. Be creative with the demise of your character. It can be a lot of fun.

If you have concerns about always playing inexperienced characters since no one persona will be around long enough, there is no reason why a character could not be used that has fictional, pre-game experience. However, might I suggest that these pre-game experiences be writ on paper so as not to confuse the character's true past with other incidents altogether separate. A character dossier and subsequent game journal is always a good idea in light of the fact that Keepers often wish to know the background of those who are to play in their game. As another point of fact, a game journal is a perfect method by which a player can correlate the complete resources of their character. This is especially useful in the solve-it-yourself scenarios which are becoming more and more popular.

This article is meant only to express my current thoughts on the subject of CTHULHU LIVES characterization as well as to seed discussion of said topic. It is by no means a mandate but merely my opinion.

