

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land*
Platform: PC, Mobile (iOS, Google Play)
Genre: Combination Turn-based and Role-Playing Game
Release Date: January 2012
Developer: Red Wasp Design
Publisher: Red Wasp Design
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Tomas Rawlings

Overview

Taking place in the trenches of World War I, *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* is not your typical war game. While set squarely in the height of the Great War, the player is quickly indoctrinated into a narrative that there are *otherworldly* forces at play, and that British and German soldiers along the Western Front are merely pawns in a greater battle for the souls of mankind. The title of the game invokes two great literary works of the early twentieth century: H.P. Lovecraft's "Call of Cthulhu," and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land." These references are integral to the overall game design, and add tremendous metaphorical depth to this narrative of war.

Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land is a turn-based role-playing game, in which the player controls up to six different characters fighting for the British Forces. It is up to the player to best harness the combination of characters, weapons, and magic, to thwart the enemy forces of an army of undead German soldiers, reanimated by the evil Dr. Kaul. Ultimately, the player must ensure that his main characters not only obtain their tactical objectives at each level, but also retain their sanity to thwart the forces of evil and win the game.

While the game is a fictitious narrative superimposed on a historical front, the game also can be read as a metanarrative of Western Civilization, and ambivalences of Modernism that evolved as a result of the Great War. This is invoked by the game designer by artfully weaving together several Rhetorics of Play. According to Brian Sutton-Smith, the Rhetorics of Play are part of cultural symbolic systems, through which societies construct meaning of the culture in which they live (1997, 9). This meaning is-- in essence-- the narrative we live by; and as a result, it is naturally expressed through the ways in which a society plays. When several of these Rhetorics are invoked in game play, what results is the equivalent of *emergence*. John Holland defines emergence as

“the product of coupled, context-dependent interactions.” (John Holland, qtd. in Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, 159). While emergence is typically reserved to describe the unintended outcomes as a result of a set of rules imposed in a game, I believe that it can be a productive metaphor for understanding how much deeper the narrative of *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* becomes as a result of the interplay between the rhetorical systems within the game. By firmly locating the narrative of *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* in the language of Lovecraft and Eliot, and the setting of World War I, the rhetorical *emergence* is profound, and makes this game’s narrative—and therefore game play—deeper than the sunken city of R’lyeh¹.

Characters

GOOD GUYS (Playable characters)

- **Captain Hill:** A career British Army officer who finds himself thrust into a battle he never could have imagined. He is described in the game’s character index as “straight laced... a good leader of men and a capable officer.” Within the narrative, he is portrayed as the leader of the other British enlisted soldiers, Brown and Launay; however, his leadership is not a playable characteristic within the game play. While the game play is a combination of turn-based and role-playing, Captain Hill never has to exercise this authority in actual game play. However, his character traits of Intelligence and Dexterity, and his capabilities with the pistol give him advantages that would be recognized as officer traits in the Army.
- **Sid “Sapper” Brown:** Sid is the other military character that communicates game narrative regularly. He is portrayed as a British commoner with a heavy local brogue, and of lower intelligence. He is nice, yet naive. He is a good soldier and within the game, operates as a reliable, and strong character. He can take a bullet better than most of the other characters, and in his position, is effective when placed between enemy fire, and weaker characters in the game—in keeping with the quiet heroism one might witness from a committed enlisted soldier in battle.
- **V. Launay:** This soldier is a bit of an enigma at the beginning of game play. He fights alongside the others, yet never participates in the narrative interludes throughout the game. Additionally, the fact that we only get his first initial adds to his anonymity within the game itself. He is not a particularly strong soldier, but is fairly accurate with his rifle when needed. He is also the slowest character, which ultimately slows the group

¹ R’lyeh is a fictional city in H.P. Lovecraft’s short story, “Call of Cthulhu,” and the resting place of Cthulhu. It is a sunken city in the Pacific Ocean, near the ocean’s pole of inaccessibility—the farthest point from any land mass.

down when trying to maintain a tight formation to maximize defensive position throughout the game.

- **Dr. Brightmeer:** An esteemed professor at the fictional Miskotonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts, he has been called upon by the Deputy-Director of the British Empire's Secret Security Service to assist in the war effort. From the opening narrative, it is apparent that Brightmeer knows about the situation in Europe, and the otherworldly forces that are actually battling the British forces. His knowledge of Dr. Kaul and the Cult of the Awakened is his largest contribution in the first two levels. Through the use of XP after the beginning levels of the game, it is possible to give Brightmeer combat advantages with rifles and other weapons. However, because he is integral to the game's narrative, he is usually the character who must analyze artifacts and participate in activities that progress the game play. These actions require him to stay in one location for one to five turns, and take away his ability to fight.
- **Mr. Carlton Green:** Mr. Green is another quiet character in the narrative elements of the game. The player is introduced to him in Level Two, and told that he is a martial arts specialist and part of Dr. Brightmeer's team. This is evident in his game play, as he is very good at close-quarters combat with a variety of creatures. His avatar shows that he is heavily battle-scarred across his face, and this only adds to his image as a battle-hardened soldier.
- **Ms. Emma Gold:** Emma Gold is introduced at the beginning of Level Four. She is a colleague of Dr. Brightmeer's as well, and comes to the battle with little in the way of armor or weaponry. She is very vulnerable throughout this first level of game play, as a result; however, once given Armor, XP, and a decent weapon, she becomes an asset to the team in future levels. She also brings with her The Book of Hysteria, which can cure others of the insanity that their fighting induces. She is a psychoanalyst, and a protégé of "the renowned Mr. Freud of Vienna." Her reasons for joining the battle are also personal: Dr. Kaul killed her twin sister. It is not until Level Five that this piece of the narrative is revealed.

BAD GUYS (Non-playable characters)

- **Dr. Kaul:** The evil mastermind creating and controlling the evil army of undead. He has used the reanimation serum of Herbert West (a Lovecraft character) in combination with ancient incantations to create an army of undead German soldiers.
- **German Soldiers:** In the first level of game play, the enemy is regular German soldiers.

- **Cultists/Cultist Officers:** These characters come out of the rear areas in the first levels of game play, from behind the German soldiers. They are living beings that have joined with Dr. Kaul.
- **Iron Cultists:** Heavily armored cultists. They carry either a machine gun or a shotgun, and are effective shots.
- **Reanimates:** Undead reanimated German soldiers encountered after the first levels of game play. Dr. Kaul uses underground machines to bring them back to life. In Level Eight, the main objective is to shut down the reanimating machines that are producing these creatures.
- **Leng Spiders:** Spiders that are encountered during and after Level Five, the first underground level.
- **Dark Young:** Large elephantine characters. Slow moving, and difficult to kill.
- **Flying Polyps:** Supernatural beings that strike from afar with a freezing spell.
- **Cthulids:** These characters are encountered in the last two levels of play. Large creatures that are fast-moving and difficult to kill. They are the spawn of Cthulhu.
- **Cthulhu:** The final creature that must be destroyed in the final level. Destroying the Great Cthulhu saves not only the six playable characters, but humanity as well.

Breakdown

Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land invokes two major literary works from the early twentieth century. The first is H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos and associated short stories, especially "The Call of Cthulhu." The second, aptly invoked, is T.S. Eliot's iconic poem about World War I, "The Waste Land." The first invokes ideas of human inadequacy at the hands of forces outside of man's control. The second examines the futility of warfare, and broken dreams of heroism in the face of unspeakable evil. These works, along with the historical setting, imbue the game narrative with several of Brian Sutton-Smith's Rhetorics of Play. The Rhetoric of Play as Power—typical in a war game—is solidly portrayed and played throughout the game. However, the game successfully invokes Rhetorics of Play as Fate and the Imaginary, which immerses the player in a compelling narrative that subtly encourages him to question who the real enemy is in any war, and to question how warfare affects those who fight—even the victors.

Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land begins in the trenches of World War I in 1915, before America has joined the war. The player has control of four characters at the outset: Dr. Brightmeer, Captain Hill, Sid “Sapper” Brown, and V. Launay. Brightmeer is introduced as an American from Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts, who has volunteered to join the fight. In actuality, Brightmeer had been notified by the Deputy-Head of the British Secret Service Bureau, and asked to “come quickly” as MI-47 indicated that the situation was much worse than initially anticipated. According to this opening narrative, Dr. Kaul is “still alive” and is active with *der Kult der Erwachten* (Cult of the Awakened).

This introduction quickly situates the game narrative in the works of H.P. Lovecraft. Miskatonic University, and the town of Arkham are prevalent fictional locations in several of Lovecraft’s work. It was first introduced in his story “Herbert West- Reanimator,” and the basic theme of this short story is an integral part of the overall plot line of the game. In the short story, Herbert West is a brilliant medical student at Miskatonic, and creates a serum that can reanimate dead bodies. In the game, Dr. Kaul has improved upon Herbert West’s serum by combining it with ancient magic. He has created an army of reanimated German soldiers to fight alongside various mythical creatures, in an effort to liberate “the great priest Cthulhu from his mighty city of R’lyeh...and again bring the Earth under his sway” (Lovecraft, “Call of Cthulhu”).

Invoking this imagery of the Lovecraftian undead is especially productive and powerful in the setting of World War I. The Great War fractured Europe’s sense of order and reality. As noted World War I historian Paul Fussell highlighted, “The Great War...was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth with had dominated public consciousness for a century. It reversed the idea of progress” (1975, 8). The British had not fought a war since 1871, and therefore no one of fighting age had ever seen combat (Fussell 1975, 21). Instead, they had been raised on narratives of the heroic epic, and Arthurian imagery of valiant and chivalrous warriors. This image of warfare was shattered abruptly in 1914.

There was a common myth amongst the soldiers on both sides of the fighting that neither the British, nor the Germans, were the real enemy: the War, itself, was the enemy (Fussell, 1975, 124). This myth was played out on both sides in the “Legend of the Wild Deserters.” Both sides imagined themselves as fighting a beast-like “other” that was not human. These soldiers were “more beat-like than men; hollowed out shells of their former selves” that issued forth from secret underground lairs and foxholes, after “each of the indeterminable checkmate battles” of trench warfare along the Western Front (Fussell, 1975, 124). This was the common battle mythology of World War I: and it could not sound more Lovecraftian if it tried. This is just one example of how locating a game based on the Cthulhu Mythos squarely in the trenches of World War I intensely magnifies the narrative *emergence* that occurs as a result of the interplay of several Rhetorics of Play throughout this game.

The game is firmly situated within the historical narrative of World War I. As a result, it has a strong Rhetoric of Play as Power. This rhetoric plays out through the narrative in surprising ways. The narrative of warfare is inherently imbued with the notion of power struggle. As Sutton-Smith highlights, the Rhetoric of Power in Western thought has two main camps: the well-known theories of Huizinga; and the conflicting views of Mihail Spariosu. Spariosu’s theories seem to be more productive in analyzing

the Rhetoric of Power displayed in *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land*. Spariosu describes it as disorderly play: “games of chance, of symbolic inversion, of carnival” (qtd. in Sutton-Smith, 81). The Rhetoric of Play as Power becomes chaotic and violent, and is situated in an indeterminate interaction of forces (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 80). This is the Rhetoric of Play as Power invoked in the game. The forces battling throughout *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* are playing for nothing less than the fate of mankind. This idea reinforces the narrative of domination that Spariosu describes. The supernatural forces that the British and Americans are fighting against highlights the chaos, the irrational, and the absolute disorder of the game world. The world is not as it seems, and the soldiers of the British Army are let in on a secret that only those at the highest ranks of government are aware of: that the British are not fighting the war against the Germans, and the stakes are much higher than territory or treasure; it is the future of humanity itself. It is interesting to highlight that this Rhetoric of Play not only appears in the narrative, but in the game play as well. By making this game a turn-based role-playing game, it replicates war gaming. As a result, the ludic aspects of the game further reinforce the traditional narrative of war games.

While the idea of chance can be read in Spariosu’s Rhetoric Of Play as Power, Sutton-Smith addresses it as its own rhetoric in his work. The Rhetoric of Play as Fate focuses on the fact that our world is not rational, “life and death... are fateful... We are creatures of the play of fortune and luck.” (1997, 53). This idea of Fate is played out both narratologically and ludologically in the game, and the two compliment each other in amplifying this rhetoric within the game. Throughout the narrative, Fate plays a prominent role. As invoked through the Cthulhu Mythos, man is not in control of his world. He is merely a pawn of supernatural forces that decide whether man lives or dies, or whether he just goes insane. The resulting narrative within the game is one in which man has no control over his fate, but fights nonetheless. While this may appear futile, this narrative embodies the Rhetoric of Play as Fate. Man plays games of chance in order to give himself “the illusion of mastery over life’s circumstances” (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 54). Just as man has no control over a game of chance, this idea is also invoked in the narrative of *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* through the invocation of Lovecraft’s work.

Additionally, this Rhetoric of Play as Fate is also expressed throughout the game play and enhances the overall struggle of the game. As it is a role-playing game, each character has certain characteristics that make it more, or less, effective throughout game play. A character may be less effective with a certain type of weapon or may have less armor, rendering him more vulnerable to attack. The game incorporates an algorithm that adds a sense of chance: some hits are effective; some are not. It is as if the Dungeon Master rolled the dice to determine if the attack was successful while playing a tabletop game. *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* successfully invokes this element of chance into the game play. The Rhetoric of Play as Fate is invoked not only through the ludic aspects of the game, but through the narrative as well, and the two amplify this rhetorical message.

The most prominent Rhetoric of Play that is located in *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* is the Rhetoric of Play as Imaginary. This Rhetoric is one of fancy, and one in which literature is play (Sutton-Smith, 1997, 135). Therefore, by locating the game play narrative squarely within the literature of Lovecraft and Eliot, this Rhetoric of Play

as Imaginary is woven throughout the narrative and game play. It is clearly evident the full extent of the Cthulhu Mythos is utilized in this game; however, the developer's use of Eliot's "The Waste Land" is subtle. The title of each level in the game is a direct reference to either a section title or a site of significant imagery in "The Waste Land." As a result, they invite the player to investigate the poem and its metaphorical significance to the game and its narrative. "The Waste Land" is one of the greatest poems of the twentieth century, and is written as a pastiche of rich references to other literary texts. It shows a desolate setting of war torn waste lands, but weaves the hope of spiritual redemption within. *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* creates a similar mood in its construction. It shows the desolation of the Western Front, and it is only through the hard work of the player, that the characters—and the world—receive salvation from the powers of evil.

This image of deliverance from evil is fulfilled in the post game credits, after successfully defeating Cthulhu. The theme song for the game is the popular WW I fighting song "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." However, throughout the game, the soundtrack is distorted, connoting the worldly perversion inculcated by Cthulhu. While this may seem a secondary aspect of the game play, and one easily overlooked, the song is also used in the victorious ending of the game. It is performed as it was back in the war era. It is clear and triumphant, and signals that the otherworldly forces no longer have sway over the game world.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of this game is the narrative emergence that occurs through the confluence of the Rhetorics of Play. The historical narrative of warfare (and the Rhetoric of Play as Power invoked by that narrative); the narrative of fate invoked by the Cthulhu Mythos (and the Rhetoric of Play as Fate); and the metaphorical depth produced by utilizing H.P. Lovecraft's and T.S. Eliot's works (Rhetoric of Play as Imaginary) combine forces to create an amazing narrative that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Unsuccessful Element

The most unsuccessful narrative element of this game is the lack of development in Emma Gold's character and narrative. The player is introduced to her as a "protégé of Mr. Freud" in level four; and in a subsequent level, the player learns that Dr. Kaul killed her twin sister. However, the player does not get the full development of that storyline. As the only female playable character, and one that is a major character that must be kept alive throughout game play, she comes across as very two-dimensional. In the last level, when Dr. Kaul is killed, Emma cries, "My sister is avenged!" However, the resolution is weak. With a game that artfully wove so many complex literary elements throughout the narrative and game play, the Emma storyline was the weakest and most undeveloped element. It was almost as if it were an afterthought. This is most upsetting from a narrative perspective because throughout his career, H.P. Lovecraft had some interesting

views about Freud and his work. This could have been a productive site of narrative development for Emma Gold's character because of her portrayal as a Freud protégé.

Highlight

The best point in the game narrative is in Level Five, when Dr. Kaul reveals that he is using the serum of Dr. Herbert West to reanimate dead German soldiers to fight the British. This situates Lovecraft's stories firmly within the game narrative. The Cthulhu Mythos takes on greater significance within the game, instead of being a surface narrative overlaid onto the game mechanics.

Critical Reception

While mainstream video game media such as *Polygon* or *Kill Screen* have not reviewed this game, it did get reviews on *Wired.com*, the *AV Club*, and *Gamezebo.com*. On *Metacritic.com*, the game has an overall score of 68 (out of 100). Most reviews were positive. Geek Dad (Jason Crawfordteague), in particular, wrote that he was addicted to this game for weeks, and played on his daily commute to and from work. He did not give it a numerical score on *Wired.com*, however his review was positive, and he appreciated the depth with which Lovecraft was artfully invoked in the game play. *AV Club* highlighted some early glitches in the iPad game play, which have since been rectified. However, overall, *AV Club* had positive things to say about the game. *Gamezebo.com* also had a positive review of the game, giving it a score of 90 out of 100, and writing that, "the plot feels like it could've been pulled straight out of one of Lovecraft's stories." It is interesting that the game has not been reviewed by mainstream video game media such as *Polygon* and *Kill Screen*. However, now that it is on Steam, and that the iPad glitches have been ironed out, it may start to get more mainstream publicity.

Lessons

- **Utilizing literary tradition can create a powerful game narrative.** Authors do it all of the time: they use characters, themes, and metaphors from other works to create pastiche. Utilizing this literary technique in a game situates it within that literary tradition, and gives the characters more symbolic weight. The developer does not have to give a lengthy back-story, because the literary allusions *provide* the back-story.
- **The more Rhetorics of Play, the better.** People are drawn to play certain video games over others. By utilizing several different Rhetorics, the designer can broaden his audience base. *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* successfully utilizes the Rhetorics of Play as Power, Fate, and Imaginary. As a result, war

game enthusiasts, RPG enthusiasts, and Lovecraft fans are all drawn to play this game. Of course, these Rhetorics need to complement one another to be effective.

- **Visually representing random chance in a game can give the player a rush.** Throughout the game when a character takes an action against another (shoot, hit, cast a spell) it does not always hit the intended target. This creates an illusion of fate, which cooperates within the narrative and the ludic aspects of the game. Similar to gambling, the element of a “near miss” in the game encourages the player to keep playing.

Summation

A game that is so richly grounded in twentieth century literary tradition was begging for a narrative review. By utilizing known narratives or mythologies, a game designer can focus on how those characters interact in the game world. It is part of a longer tradition that occurs in the literary world; therefore it is only fitting that game designers utilize these same techniques of pastiche that other storytellers have routinely used in the past. *Call of Cthulhu: The Wasted Land* artfully weaves the work of Lovecraft with that of Eliot into this game. In doing so, it makes bold metaphorical connections between the view of warfare coming out of WW I, and the resultant Modernist movement. The Great War fractured the identity of Western civilization, and fractured the illusion of humanity. Lovecraft writes, “that glimpse, like all dread glimpses of truth, flashed out from an accidental piecing together of separated things” (“Call of Cthulhu”). And by piecing together the Rhetorics of Play as Power, Fate, and the Imaginary, Red Wasp Designs provides the player with an amazingly powerful pastiche, which highlights the ways in which the West has tried to make sense of the Great War.

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