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# DE PROFUNDIS

Cthulhu Gaming on the Edge of Madness





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**The Dream**.....25th December, 1998

Greetings!

I still haven't received your answer to my most recent letter. However, I'm sending this straight away, as something important has happened since I last wrote. Something strange. I don't know where to begin, so you won't think I've gone completely mad. Remember our conversations about dreams? Those strange, rare dreams, different from the common, random play of the unconscious? It's been a few years since my last experience like that. But now...

On the night of 20th/21st December, I had a stranger and more vivid dream than any I've ever had. I was in a forest. Do you remember those vast woods in Brudnice we used to explore as children during our holidays? I think it was the same one: great trunks reaching up so high their tops were lost in darkness. There was mist lying in the ravines, whirling around our feet, winding itself round the gnarled tree-roots sticking out of the thick carpet of needles. Literally everything was overgrown by moss. I walked away from the village, venturing so far into the forest it was hard to imagine I'd ever return. As kids we never dared venture even a fraction as far. I don't know how long I walked, maybe days. The trees I passed became older, bigger, more menacing. Each was like a fortress guarding a terrible secret in the dark and mist. Something was calling me, drawing me closer like some hypnotising, beautiful music. One day I'll tell you all the adventures I had on my way to the heart of that forest, all the scenes forever imprinted on my soul. Suffice it to say I finally got there, to the ancient wilderness, the thick mass of huge cracked pillars swaying majestically in a hideous bog. That was where a magnetic voice called to me, to travel many miles through the woods to my grandmother's village. A cabin of reeds and rotten logs and branches stood at the edge of a small glade in the middle of the bog. The voice grew louder, as if something were struggling to reach the surface. I went inside. Besides a makeshift table and hanging shelves filled with tiny jars, dried herbs, and yellowed pages covered in writing, there was an old trunk. I opened it. Inside, on a pile of leather clothes, I found a book. I took it in my hand; thick embossed covers handmade from strong leather. Some words were engraved along the spine, perhaps the title: *De Profundis*. I turned the heavy cover. At first glance, I thought it was a diary. However, as I turned the thick pages filled with handwriting, I saw numerous tables, the weirdest formulae and symbols. It was a game. Someone had lived in this cabin in the middle of these woods and marshes near Poland's eastern border, creating something incomprehensible. A hermit cut off from the world, even from the primitive life of the nearest village miles away, had been writing something he had called *De Profundis*. What kind of madman had he been? Had his work been accompanied by the same voice that had drawn me to the marshes? I wasn't sure this was merely a dream; holding the insane manuscript in my hands, I trembled with uncertainty and amazement. Then I woke up.

You probably know that acute sensation of loss when, having found a treasure in a dream, you wake up to find it gone, your hands empty. Even less than empty: a hole left behind by the thing you desired. I have to reconstruct what I held in my hands just for a moment in the dreamwoods of Hypnos and Shub Niggurath. I don't know how much I've retained, but they say it's enough to look at something once to have it engraved somewhere in the depths of your unconscious forever. I hope so, because nearly a week has passed since that dream, and I can't think of anything else except that mysterious book. Reconstructing it would need dozens of people, but I'll try to start by myself. In my next letter I'll send you my notes, so you can get some idea of the concept behind the hermit's manuscript. In the meantime I'll take out all the complexities and the unclear relationship between the game and our lives, our world, as well as all the rules, which I don't yet understand myself. I'm certain of one thing – it's more than a game. I'm afraid to think what it really is. I remember the magnetic song of the forest; I can hear it even now.

## **The New Wave**.....5th January, 1999

Have you heard of "new wave" games? These days role-playing games are evolving more and more quickly. Remember how we used to spend nights playing 'dungeon games', poring over sheets of graph paper scribbled over with dungeon maps? I still have my papers – even now there are whole piles of them lying in my study. Today, after all these years, these childhood drawings have yellowed in places and now look like real maps of real dungeons. I even think that's what they are, in a way. When I sit down with them late at night in the dim lamplight with a mug of steaming coffee, they transport me to other places. They do lead to dungeons – mazes of the mind, of memory, maybe to mysteries deep in the souls of those who became gamers but are in fact a separate species, a kind of dreamer ever looking for other, hidden worlds. You know, I wonder what's happened to me... I've mentioned my strange dream to you, and the game that's got me so obsessed. Well, what if it were published? I guess they'd call it a "new wave" game. That's weird, isn't it? The New Wave and me... Sometimes when I'm working on the game I enter a strange state of consciousness, as if someone were whispering things in my ear. Have you heard of 'automatic writing'? You must have. Well, it's like that. Or almost, because I still need to use my brain. In the next letters, I'll describe the game. I wonder what you'll think. I have this eerie impression that if only I had the right key, and unlocked the right door in my brain, the whole game would just fall out, complete, finished, as though it were already there somewhere, and I just had to peep through the keyhole to see it. I can feel it's close, but I can't reach it; I just grab at bits of it and piece them together like parts of a torn photograph. Not everything fits yet, but I know they're parts of a coherent whole.



**De Profundis**.....11th January, 1999

I know. It's called *De Profundis*. I've had dreams – or rather visions. I saw it born and crawl from the Abyss. Lots of people, lots of role-players, want and try to see the other side of the world, go mad, look beyond the horizon of reality. *De Profundis* will be a gate for them; it will give them what they're looking for. I'm just a tool – but something that will consume these seekers' senses has crawled out of the Abyss. *De Profundis* is cursed; it should never have seen daylight. But I'm sure it will. At times I fight myself, fight this thing whispering in the night. I keep hoping that even if I fail to stop this power, maybe you will do so instead and prevent its filthy touch from contaminating those other careless dreamers like me, seeking the Joyous Realm beyond Yonder Mountains. Stop this Thing now taking the form of *De Profundis* from entering our world! It's toying with me like a puppet, mocking my attempts to resist its creeping insanity. The more I struggle, the more it comes into the world. Each word of warning I write becomes an instrument of *De Profundis*, working in its favour. What are its intentions? What does it want? I dread to think. Madness is contagious; you know that. And this is concentrated madness. Eventually my resistance will fail and its insane idea will possess me completely. I have to write, and admire this blasphemous work; I have to serve it. I have to write this game. It absorbs me more and more. Where is the fear, the apprehension? All I do now is write, think, create. I finalise details, draw up tables, check everything. The vision of the complete idea haunts me constantly. This vision is what scared me when I was beginning to write. Even then, with some part of my mind, I could see the end, the horrifying epilogue of *De Profundis*, written not on sheets of paper but on the leaves of my life. It's awful: I can see it crawling towards me even now.

You know that I've always – maybe ever since I was born – loved reading Howard Phillips Lovecraft, and writers like him. Maybe what I'm facing now is just oversensitiveness, a psychological crisis – maybe the influence of Lovecraft is to blame. It seems to me Lovecraft left hidden warnings between the lines of his stories. Look – I take a volume of his stories, any one. I open it at random, and what do I see? The recluse, writing about forbidden aeons that make you shudder when you think of them, drive you mad when you dream of them. And then: 'That glimpse, like all dread glimpses of truth, flashed out from an accidental piecing together of separated things - in this case an old newspaper item and the notes of a dead professor. I hope that no one else will accomplish this piecing out; certainly, if I live, I shall never knowingly supply a link in so hideous a chain.' Now, isn't that a hint? A warning? But many dig deeper and deeper, the way we do. Lovecraft knew something – he knew, though he pretended to be an ordinary writer. Lots of other people have understood as well. And to this day many of them try to wipe clean this grimy window which looks out on The Truth, terrible and incomprehensible.

Links are added to the chain; the plague spreads, even in the normal world. And beings from Beyond keep pressing in, emerging, devouring their victims, using them as tools to further their goals. Lovecraft wrote about terrible books, but it's his books which spread the plague of madness.

If it were not too late, I'd back out of this insidious undertaking. Alas, things have already gone too far.

## The Three Pillars.....23rd January, 1999

What was I writing about in my last letter? I hope you'll forgive me these fantasies; I was horribly overworked and down with the flu, or maybe something worse. Now the fever's gone, and all the crazy fantasies caused by the illness. *De Profundis* may well be a strange game, but it's only a game after all. All things Lovecraftian seem to border on insanity, on some horror 'from beyond this world'. Still, HPL is more than just horror. I wanted to send you more about the game, and instead went on some mad diatribe. I'm sorry.

Let's get back to it. So, imagine a tree with many branches, walking on three legs. That's what *De Profundis* is like: like a symbol for the three-legged form of Nyarlathotep. It has three parts, rests on three pillars: part one is *Letters from the Abyss*, part two is *Phantasmagoria*, and part three is *Hermitage*. They're all inextricably interconnected, together forming a whole game. In a way, they're consecutive stages or levels, intertwining, complementing and supporting each other. *Letters from the Abyss* is the main game, and the other two parts sort of power it. If you asked me for the most general term to describe *De Profundis*, I think I'd say 'correspondence psychodrama', at least in reference to the first part. Don't mistake it for a play-by-mail game. Can playing a play-by-mail game drive you mad? The thing has its reasons for choosing psychodrama to manifest itself – psychodrama, which operates like a surgeon on the living brain. Psychodrama can draw people into the maelstrom of madness and throw them around like puppets to musical rhythms coming from who knows where.

Sorry. I started to rant again. It's this game – its subject. I'm too involved. You of all people know that when I do something, I do it 100%. So just ignore me if I go off like that again. Take this as an apology in advance.

Right – back to topic. *De Profundis* is three different types of psychodrama. The first (correspondence psychodrama) is accompanied by another two: field psychodrama, and solo psychodrama. Don't worry, field psychodrama has nothing to do with LARPing. Instead it's more like—



Ah! There's a storm coming outside. The sky's grey, and heavy. The first drops are hitting the windowpane. I want to post this letter today, so I'll stop here. I'll run to the post office before it starts for real. I'll finish next time.

## Psychodrama

2nd February, 1999

In your last letter you asked me to write some more about psychodrama. Well, I guess we really can't leave this out. How can we discuss correspondence, field, solo or other kinds of psychodrama, when you're completely unfamiliar with this kind of game?

Psychodrama is close to a role-playing game, but without a game master. The players create everything themselves, from their characters to events in the game world. Every participant is a player and a game master at the same time. You don't need anything to play a psychodrama session: a description of the world, character sheets, rules, a scenario. The players – gathered in a darkened room – simply close their eyes, and one of them describes a place. They all go there in their imagination. Another player tells the next part of the story. Other players join in, creating the adventure in which they're the main characters. Each adds a piece of this common tale in turn, now acting as though they were in a radio play, now describing events and places like a writer or a game master. Several game masters with equal authority create the story, so it changes dynamically, and at the beginning, no one can imagine where it will lead. Playing with their eyes closed, each time confronting their own vision with those of others, continuing and developing each other's plot threads, they come close to the boundary of dream, and almost begin to actually see the scenes in the game. It's not faking: as it goes on, the game leads the players into deeper and deeper levels of their unconscious, until towards the end they're engulfed by it the way we are by sleep. When the psychodrama session is over, the players are surprised at its course and need a lot of time to shake it off.

I'm putting a photocopy of a longer article on psychodrama into the envelope. Read it now if you want to.

In my next letter I'll move on to specifics: it's time the game came to life, time you learned how to pass through the gate of hard reality and learned the plasticity and transience of our world. If you don't want to, don't open the letters. Burn them and throw the ash away. But for me there's no going back. It's amazing...





# Book One

Letters from the Abyss

## H.P. Lovecraft and an Idea.....8th February, 1999

The author of the book in my dream wrote about things I'm familiar with. Every now and then on the yellowed pages I saw accursed names mentioned by Lovecraft in his works. But I saw other names there, too – names I don't know. What does that mean? I start wondering how many of the things Lovecraft wrote about were actually invented by him. Where is the line where insanity ends and reality begins?

The game I'm sweating over, trying to piece together from my lost dream, is based on the works of the Providence Recluse and his followers. If I've managed to grasp the essence of the Hermit's game, it was structured, first and foremost, around the major stylistic features of those works. Let's be specific I've noticed that while part of those works contains descriptions of events and actions, an equally large part comprises letters: various peoples' stories, cited literally and in full, or lengthy confessions and meditations by the main characters. Yes – Lovecraft's stories are confessions on paper, his characters' diaries. They're full of documents, newspaper articles, letters – that's what they're made of, where their essence lies. That's the core of their atmosphere and realism, their inner space. The characters in these stories are alone, they must face the horror, their fear and madness, on their own while – as they uncover the Truth – their world crumbles into dust and nothingness. When we play *De Profundis* we're really alone. Due to the game's form, we're less inclined to burden our character with weapons, which mostly kill the spirit of Lovecraftian role-playing. I don't know if the author of the dream *De Profundis* knew about role-playing games – but we do. Often we've taken part in adventures based on that first component of Lovecraft's scheme, the action which takes place in the physical world. Now it's time to try the other component: psychological experiences, reaching with your mind into real mysteries, learning the nature of that which has touched the very selves of the characters in those insane stories. It's also time for you to learn what *De Profundis* is all about.

*De Profundis* is letters.

It's *being* the characters we've often played in role-playing games.



It's blurring the line between the game and reality.

*De Profundis* is psychodrama.

So, look. *Letters from the Abyss* isn't play-by-mail: it's role-playing the letter-writing. You act out a character who writes letters similar in style and atmosphere to those we know from Lovecraft's stories, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, etc. Remember *Dracula*? It's all letters and diaries, giving the uncanny impression of a collection of authentic documents. In *De Profundis*, the action takes place mostly in the psyches of its characters, who encounter incomprehensible, mysterious powers over many letters, many weeks or months. It progresses slowly, subtly, full of minute details and nuances. The best way of learning it is to read HPL and other horror and mystery authors from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In these letters, our characters describe the mysterious things going on around them, secrets discovered in old books, results of research or ponderings. But I'll write more about this in a future letter, when you know how to make yourself a character.

Let's get back to psychodrama. Of course, it offers extremely profound and shocking experiences, but it also takes great effort, and needs you to overcome the inhibitions that otherwise make a smooth game impossible to many potential players. Many players don't dare engage in such spiritual pornography in front of others, live, almost "on stage". Does that mean the gates of psychodrama are closed to them? Not really. Not anymore. Now they needn't be deprived of what psychodrama has to offer. Because here is where *De Profundis* comes in. Thanks to this game, everyone can experience psychodrama in a slightly different way – not in public, but in the privacy of their own home. Nonetheless, the intimacy between the players remains. It's long been known that a written letter often allows much deeper contact between people than a face-to-face meeting. Take for example our letters, yours and mine. Lots of times we've discussed deeply personal problems, which we've never talked about face to face. In direct encounters, we can't bring ourselves to be so open; there are too many inhibitions, even though we've been friends for many years.

**PS**

I've already written my first *De Profundis* letter. However, I haven't explained the idea of the game to the recipient yet (I won't tell you who that is right now), so I'm a little anxious about the reply. I've let myself be sucked into this mad maelstrom created by the Hermit from the marshes. His game can open our eyes to the *real form* of everything around us. Trust me: it's not madness. Or at least I hope not. See you.

## H.P. Lovecraft: Universe and Canon.....19th February, 1999

It's wet outside; the last few white heaps of snow are quickly turning to grey slush. Watery, blue-grey clouds, a pale blurred sun. It gets dark quickly when it snows like this: a wet, sticky storm of sleet. The visibility falls like in thick fog. And in this greyness, *It* lurks.

When I walk the streets or ride on a bus, I start noticing the furtive glances some people give me. They're the ones who know, and they're waiting. Look around you closely, because now you're part of it too. Actually, I don't know myself how much I've let myself get carried away by the atmosphere, and how much I've messed with powers beyond the human ability to comprehend. Sometimes I think I don't live in the real world any more, but in some other, imaginary world, straight out of our fantastic and sometimes frightening games. Now you've decided to cross the line too, and see everything differently. Well, remember: *De Profundis* is a gateway to madness, even though it appears to be just a game. Think about it again. Are you in?

If you are, then let me offer some thoughts on the game universe, and especially how it relates to the world created by Lovecraft. Now, you may find it surprising, but we don't play in HPL's world at all, but rather in our own real one, except that in this real world we look for scraps of what Lovecraft and the others wrote about. That's exactly what I remember from the Hermit's manuscript; after all, he wasn't really creating a game, but rather rules for correspondence between those few outsiders who've encountered the hidden side of our reality.

In other words, in *De Profundis*, unlike in virtually every other role-playing game, you won't find a ready-made conventional world custom-built for the purposes of the game. There's no established canon of binding fictions, no bestiary or set of a priori secret truths, apparently unknown to everyone but in practice widely known. In *De Profundis* we blur the line between the game world and the real world we inhabit in everyday life. I'll describe the rules for modifying its elements and searching for secrets, magic and hidden nightmares in it a little later; expect a letter on the mysteries of the "filters" we use to perceive reality in different ways, seeing other worlds instead of the one we're used to.

*De Profundis* is based in our own real world. But, it's also for lovers of Lovecraftian literature, so when looking at the reality around us, we try to see in it the things the Providence Recluse wrote about. We look for them in *our world*. Here, Lovecraft isn't the creator of the game's universe; he's just one actual, real writer of mystery tales, and one of those who have glimpsed the Truth.

To summarise what I've said above – and which may seem contradictory – in *De Profundis* we assume there is some "Thing" in our world, but whether that Thing is precisely what



Lovecraft wrote about is open to question. We'll know when we start playing: then we'll begin to discover bits and pieces of the Truth about the mysteries of our world.

As living people in the real world confronted by situations Lovecraft's characters had to face, we really stand before a mystery – the Unknown. We're not playing a horror game where we know the most hidden secrets beforehand because they've been set out as "canon" in the game. Here, when we start playing, we don't know which way the wind's going to blow. Nobody knows. That's what makes it psychodrama – nobody knows where it will lead.

In *De Profundis* we don't declare to the game master that we're going to do a "library search"; we go to a real library ourselves, to look for vague comments and hints that cause shivers of cosmic terror. We have all the books of all the libraries in the world to look through and fish for secrets and hidden, disguised truths.

So, the game world is a mix of our common everyday reality, the works of HPL and others whose visions we consider close to his, and our vision of the hidden side of the world. Almost every Lovecraft fan makes their own associations when reading his stories, refers his 'fantasies' to our world and to other authors' visions in their own way. That's why almost everyone has a different view of HPL: one person links him to post-Einsteinian physics, another to Hawking himself, still another to Clive Barker's mythos, Jung's theories, Monroe's experiments, or Dunsany's and Hodgeson's fiction. In *De Profundis*, everyone can try to test their own inventive and amazing interpretations of the facts described in Lovecraft's stories; everyone has the right to their own interpretation of the 'mythos', their own reflections and investigations. We don't assume any 'sacrosanct canon' of HPL's 'truths', binding for all players. In *De Profundis*, we don't just reconstruct Lovecraft's creation piecemeal, but go further to create something new and belonging to us. HPL wrote about the Truth he was discovering; but even he might be wrong in places, incorrectly interpreting facts and symbols.

Finally, let me touch briefly on the cosmos of the game – what we call the 'mythos' most likely to exist in the real world. HPL tried to describe it in part. To what extent he guessed the Truth, and to what extent he created literary fiction, we don't know. It's time we found out; time we looked around us carefully.

That's it for now. I hope I've been precise enough in explaining the subtle difference in approach to the game universe in *De Profundis* and traditional role-playing games.

## PS

As the three parts of *De Profundis* only form a whole game when taken together, you now need to learn how to create a character before I can explain what each part is about in more detail. So, in the next letter I'm going to deal mostly with character creation.

## PPS

I feel much better.

## The Society.....3rd March, 1999

Phew! I've just got home and made myself some hot tea. Isn't it cold outside! Snowing again, and that damned wind is blowing, too. The blurred eye of the moon is peering out from behind frayed clouds. I ran quickly between the buildings because I don't like the nosey looks people give me. I've been to Grzegorz: he got the *De Profundis* bug, so now we have another member in our Society. As you know, he's a great lover of spooky stuff; Grzegorz is the one we experimented with lucid dreaming with a few years back. Anyway – my Society is growing. How about yours?

When you start playing *De Profundis*, the first thing to do is to find some people who share your interests. You wrote that you'd like to try and start playing yourself – so look around for suitable candidates. Try and find people with an interest in the mysterious side of the world, people for whom reality isn't as simple and obvious as it is to the blind masses. Oh – and don't think they all need to be gamers! Not at all! *De Profundis* is so focussed that non-roleplayers will actually find it easier to understand than roleplayers. Look for people who love reading books, searching libraries, learning about crazy fantasies, investigating unexplained phenomena, seeking out the eerie and uncanny parts of the world. They could be non-gamer fantasy or science fiction fans; especially Lovecraft fans. Non-gamers needn't treat *De Profundis* as a game at all; they can just see it as having fun with para-literature. And role-players? Well, if they're willing to dare something new, they won't have to worry about not having enough time to play yet another game, as is usually the case with the new games that keep appearing on the market. No – you don't have to worry about that, as *De Profundis* won't replace any other games: it'll just fill those idle moments when we can't game anyway: when we're alone at home, when we're walking or going somewhere by bus. *De Profundis* is also for people who don't have the spare time to come to sessions regularly, but who'd still like to turn up and visit from time to time that other, magical world which role-playing games give us. While they're writing or reading a letter, they'll forget for a while the ordinary work which drags them away from the world's hidden side, from the realms of the imagination. *De Profundis* reaches out its tentacles to grab anyone and everyone who's a bit different from the ordinary folk, locked away behind the unbreakable walls of their little worlds like mindless rats in a cage.

Look for the right people. Don't forget people in other cities. We could easily play *De Profundis* right now, just me and you, and – who knows? – maybe we will. But for now it's more important to explain the game's concept, as well as its details and my own thoughts about it, as precisely as possible.

I'm going to assemble some of the outstanding characters from my Society here, and I hope and wish you'll do the same for yours. Then we can mix the two groups up. When we're ready, we can raise the curtain and begin. Here goes...



## **De Profundis and the Call of Cthulhu.....13th March, 1999**

Ah! The play report from your last session of *Call of Cthulhu* was excellent. You got me all but carried off to Damian's room and sitting there with you, then off with the group into the depths of the ocean in that small bathysphere. Top quality *CoC*!

Which brings me to the point: you mentioned the interesting issue of people who play investigators in *Call of Cthulhu*. Well, they can take *De Profundis* as a game supplement. Instead of creating new characters, they can play *De Profundis* with previous or current investigators. It'll give them the chance to take out those forgotten, dust-covered characters sheets that have been through so much. Exchanging letters between investigators – maybe GM-moderated – will take you to the next level of Lovecraft's stories, deep into the investigators' minds, into the realm of mental perception, reflection, and guesses – even to browsing actual libraries. Finally it also gives players a time and place to share the extremely important inner experiences of their characters with other players, which unfortunately you can't act out in a traditional role-playing session. And it's this inner life that's so characteristic of Lovecraft's literature it could even be his trademark. Nearly every story of his is a kind of diary, full of descriptions of the subtlest thoughts, fears, guesses and spiritual transformations, as well as information collected from everywhere – letters, eyewitness reports of mysterious events, reports from inhabitants of strange places or tales and notes by other explorers of the unexplained. Where else can you play a character subject to a slow metamorphosis lasting many years, like Richard Upton Pickman or the descendant of the marshes from accursed Innsmouth? For that you need a psychodrama lasting months or years of play – in other words, doing so by exchanging letters.

And what about game masters who want to exchange ideas about the Mythos in this stylised letter form, to enter this universe even more deeply and play together regardless of the distance between them and despite any other limitations? There's no reason why they shouldn't.

### **PS**

How about our Wehrmacht guys from Piotr's sessions (the ones with the ghouls and World War II) getting in touch? We know that nothing's ever been the same for them since. The story of the unit of the damned was never finished; Piotr just never carried on with it. What do you think?

### **PPS**

Look around. Have a good look at your surroundings. Haven't you noticed anything strange recently?

## Societies and the Network.....25th March, 1999

To be honest, you surprised me with that list of your *De Profundis* society members. I'd never have guessed someone like, say, Jacek would ever play. How's he doing? Or maybe don't tell me: maybe I'll write to him myself and try exchanging some letters. Right – remember how I mentioned mixing two groups of players? Well, there are two ways to play *De Profundis* : a local Society, and a Network. Each player (or the whole group together) should make up their minds whether they prefer to play in a small group of several people (like a traditional role-playing game), or to try the open seas and play in a Network, with an open group of indefinite size where you can encounter absolutely anyone. Playing in a Network will probably entail a few ways of getting and swapping addresses of various people you don't know yet: Cthulhu fans from other cities, remote parts of the country, or even overseas. One way is to use the list of my friends who are already involved in *De Profundis* and are acting as temporary co-ordinators for Network play. I'll send you that list shortly – maybe you'll want to get more involved and act as a Network contact point? I'm sure you will.

Unless you'd rather correspond only within your own group of friends. In that case, decide on everything yourselves, setting all the rules and solving any problems with players who've violated the convention (may the Shoggoth devour them!).

Have a quick look at the enclosed page with the examples of Character Archetypes on it. Got it? Right. Now that's an experience! To be Pickman, Whateley, the Terrible Old Man or Rork! That's madness! But note you can't have two Wilbur Whateleys or two R.U. Pickmans in the Network. At some point people will start playing in the Network who've chosen to play one of these famous characters. They'll be taking on a heavy responsibility, and they'd better do it well, because otherwise they'll soon lose the role and get labelled as a madman whose letters shouldn't be taken seriously! When a player loses the role of a famous Lovecraft character, that role is free again for someone more appropriate. Playing Herbert West for a long period needs you to try really hard to feel the character and – to a certain extent – to win the acceptance of the other participants. Self-made characters don't have any such problems.

I've been thinking myself about trying the role of Pickman, or another outsider and painter, Robert Blake. Both characters are splendid. I'd have to resurrect Blake for this, because he died in *The Hunter of the Dark*. But I'm more attracted to Pickman. Ah – to show what it really means to be the most sensitive of artists, and for that reason to turn into a meeping ghoul gnawing at human bones, dwelling in eternally dark caves in the lands of dream... What sane person would understand that?



## Me or My Character?.....5th April, 1999

The snow still hasn't melted completely. When is spring finally going to come and scatter those fogs, when will that greyness invading my dreams disappear? When is the birdsong going to scare away the silence and the ominous cawing of crows? I'm tired with this cold and damp everywhere.

You wrote about your doubts and the ambiguities regarding character creation, but don't worry – I'll explain in much more detail in future letters. After all, I actually held the book by the hermit of the marshes in my own hands. I myself have other doubts. In particular, there are times I can't tell for sure who I am: myself, or a character in *De Profundis*. I haven't told you yet, but I have another character ready besides Pickman, namely that of the author of *De Profundis*, the Hermit. But forget that. Actually, I feel like creating ten different characters. I know it's better to choose just one, though; then I'll devote all my attention and time to that character, and finally I'll almost turn into him.

About your doubts. Now you've got some idea what the game's all about, and you're wondering, what next?

Next we need to choose the characters we're going to play, who we're going to act out in the game. Because we can play:

- ourselves;
- an investigator from *The Call of Cthulhu*, old or current;
- a character from a story by HPL or another author.

Each choice has its own unique charm. If we decide to play ourselves, won't that be the easiest to portray, won't the results be truest to life? We're best at acting the role of our own self – it's our party trick. When we play ourselves we remove the barrier separating the game from the world almost entirely, and by exchanging letters we get to know a real, living human being, a unique, authentic person, with a twisted soul very much like ours.

However, we can also modify ourselves a little, creating the character we find most interesting to play. We can add a mysterious past, age, scholarly or career titles (HPL's works virtually swarm with doctors, inspectors, and the like), we can adapt to the period the game takes place. We can change anything, creating a new character based on ourselves. But we have to remember one thing: if we choose to play an authority in some field, we need to know it inside out. It must be our hobby. For example, if you choose to play an archaeologist travelling all over the world,

you should at least be an archaeology student. If you play a history professor, you'd better know your history, and well. Otherwise, you'll fail: if your letters seem artificial, contrived, unreliable or even ridiculous, all the effort invested in the atmosphere and all your intuition will be in vain. The spell will be broken, and the magical psychodrama will turn into a grotesque pseudo-game.



*PS*

Interesting. I was going to send you a psychology article with this letter, but it's gone. I just came into my room and found all my papers in a mess on the floor, as if the wind had blown them off my desk. The window was shut fast, though. The article has gone, and it contained several extremely interesting remarks on findings in scientific experiments with the human brain. Well, I'll post it when I find it. But... it's weird. I feel inexplicably worried. Has someone been looking through my papers? That's impossible...



## The Two Periods.....18th April, 1999

I was sad to hear your news. Why did you fall ill so suddenly? Maybe the doctors are wrong and it's just a new flu bug? Anyway, I'm happy you like the game, even though I still haven't explained much of it, let alone given you any details. But you took me completely by surprise by writing that you'd already begun playing. Good God – how? I know your inventiveness and imagination, so I'm asking: please write to me about how you see the specific aspects of the game, it must be quite different from how I see it. I can't wait to read more. What period are you using? Present or past?

Right. I need to stress something here.

Setting the time period and location for your local Society game can be done pretty easily and freely when it's just a few friends playing *De Profundis* together; but in a Network you need some pre-established conventions and a fixed game world. A group of friends can choose any country, characters and year freely, and can even experiment with playing in other, non-*Lovecraftian* worlds. It only affects them. But in a Network doing that would soon get out of hand and end up in total chaos.

So, for a Network game I'd suggest choosing one of two periods:

1. The period of Lovecraft's stories, or (to be precise) the year 1920;
2. Here and now – the present day, with current dates.

Of course, neither period is frozen in time, and from the moment the games start in the Network, the days, months and years run in parallel with real time. And while that's easy with 'here and now', where the game date is identical to the real-world date, 'the Twenties' may end up a little confusing as time passes, with the same day and month date, but a different year. You start in 1920, but after two years of play it's 1922!

It's important to distinguish clearly between the two separate universes, and not just by dating your letters appropriately, but also by marking the envelopes next to the sender's address, in the top left corner, as follows:

- a small red circle indicates a 'here and now' letter;
- a small blue triangle indicates a 'Twenties' letter.

This way, when a player receives a *De Profundis* letter, he or she can adjust to the right period and 'get in the mood' before opening the envelope. After a long, busy day, they can brew some coffee, sit at their desk in peace and quiet, put on some suitable music and then... as, say, Pickman, read a letter from a friend.

If you don't mark the letter, the addressee won't be able to prepare unless they open the envelope earlier and look – but you shouldn't do it that way. *De Profundis* letters shouldn't be opened just like that and scanned through during the day just like any other letter: letters from the Abyss should be relished, like stories.

Another difference between the two periods is the role of Lovecraft. In the 'Twenties game' there is no Lovecraft: our characters have never heard of him. More, the chronology of his stories isn't binding, although you can take characters, places or themes from them as you want. This suspension of chronology applies particularly to any final events, when places like Innsmouth are raided by armed forces and razed to the ground, and most main characters in the story are killed. In other words, in our game, Innsmouth may still be hiding its frightening secrets, R. Blake may still be writing his stories and painting his insane pictures, and W. Whateley may still be expanding his occult knowledge and living with his ever-growing brother. In a 'here and now game', on the other hand, the Providence Recluse actually exists for us as an early 20th century author of mystery tales. One who could see fragments of the Truth, of course.

Generally speaking, in the here and now game we play ourselves, making it very realistic, and we try to be subtle and believable when weaving fantastic elements into the game world. In the Twenties game, we can afford to have more fiction and more literary convention, as well as to draw directly from Lovecraft's stories. 'Here and now' is hyper-realistic; 'the Twenties' is hyper-Lovecraftian.

Write back as soon as you can.

And get well soon!

## Two Characters in the Two Periods.....3rd May, 1999

At last the weather's changed. It's sunny, warm and dry. Maybe the brighter light of our star will banish the nightmare I had three days ago. Did anything strange happen at your place that night? Here, heavy clouds covered the sky in less than an hour, and there was a hellish storm. It was so close I developed a headache immediately and decided just to go straight to bed. My God, what place gave birth to the demons that decided to visit me that night, and torment me in my sleep? What abyss did they crawl out of? For the first time in my life I thought I could understand what Walpurgis Night really means. Fortunately, my memory of that fear is gradually fading. Filled with new strength, I've carried on painstakingly reconstructing *De Profundis*.



You complained that both of the suggested periods are interesting, and that it's hard to decide which one to play in. You suggested solving the problem by not giving the players a choice and imposing one particular universe on them. I don't think this is a good idea.

Why have the choice of two periods at all? Because each has its own, crucial strong points. 'Here and now', or the present day, we know best, have always known it and have it in our blood. In this setting, which we know from everyday life, the game is easiest, and you can't say our world isn't interesting enough or doesn't have any mysteries. Quite the opposite: our everyday reality is so rich, so full of nuances and prone to conspiracy-theory interpretations that it *can't* be grasped, even in the most general terms. I don't think we'll ever run out of good subjects: new sensational events occur every day, and new light is shed on old mysteries. Besides, by playing in the contemporary world we can take advantage of the countless newspapers, TV programmes, etc; they're all treasure-houses and mines of ideas.

As far as the Twenties is concerned, that's a world inhabited by the characters of Lovecraft's stories! It's the world where the Whateleys cross-breed with Yog Sothoth, where a strange meteorite falls on Nahum Gardner's farm, where Pickman paints portraits of his living nightmarish models, Carter tries to reach Kadath, West plays Doctor Frankenstein, Robert Blake dies of terror looking out of his window, and Akeley sends increasingly strange letters from his farm besieged by alien creatures. The Twenties is atmosphere! Alas, we're usually less familiar with that world, more unsure. It's more difficult to see all the details. All we can do is start a Twenties game with some (preferably little) leeway for inaccuracy; with time, we should learn the details. Moreover, in the Twenties, traditional letter correspondence actually looks more natural, even though it's also undergone something of a revival in our day too.

Both universes are unique, and one of a kind. So, I suggest playing *De Profundis* with two different characters: one in the modern world and another in the Twenties. I also recommend combining character choice with period, so the specially-created character (in Lovecraftian style) will go with the 1920s, while 'here and now' we can just play ourselves. In the next sections of the game, which I'll be detailing in future letters, I'll distinguish between the playing style of the two periods and the two types of characters.

## PS

If you're playing two different characters, be careful not to confuse the plots of the two stories, or even the characters. And don't confuse yourself with a character. Be careful.

## The Country.....11th May, 1999

Well, well. What quite shocking characters you've created for yourself. And as you're one of them, we're probably playing *De Profundis* now. Or nearly.

I've one last comment about character creation: you need to agree on the country your characters live in. In a local Society game, you decide this between yourselves before starting play. So, for example, if you choose to play yourselves, it'll usually be your actual place of residence in your country. It doesn't have to be, of course. If one of your players knows a town or city in some foreign country like the back of his hand, if they've stayed there long enough and think they can reproduce everyday life in that place, then they can 'pretend' to live there.

Now, with fictional characters – for example those created for a Twenties game – the question is more open to discussion, because here we're tempted to play in New England, in Arkham, Ipswich etc. And if our character is actually Lovecraft's, there's no doubt left: we live where HPL himself put us. Under these circumstances, we may leave a little leeway for inaccuracies again, but just as with the period, we should gradually expand our knowledge of a place, improving the quality of the game and the fun it provides.

All we're left with now is announcing the countries where the two big open-access Network games will take place. So, the Network game starting in 1920 takes place in the state of Massachusetts on the American East Coast, and generally in the United States. The 'here and now' game, on the other hand, is played mostly in our own countries. Of course, as we're talking about experts acquainted with forbidden things, their letters may well come from all over the world; this is how it should be in *De Profundis*. Letters from Kathmandu, from Siberia, from Darkest Africa, Israel, Egypt... these places have the atmosphere we want. All it takes is familiarity with the place and its culture.

And that's the final touch to your character. Unless, of course, you still haven't worked out details like family, residence, your character's past, etc. No need to moan: that'll be a piece of cake for a gamer like you. Besides, if you're playing yourself you have everything ready and more believable than in any other RPG.

Remember the author of your letters is your character – and characters express emotions, have personalities, favourite sayings, etc. But – you don't need me to tell you that, do you?



**Style**.....22nd May, 1999

It's quite green outside now: green grass, trees, moss, bushes. But it's getting cold again. Watery clouds covering the sun. The wind's pulling at the tree-tops and making my window curtain move. And I'm writing you a letter.

Right. The letter.

The letter is our 'board' for playing *De Profundis*. It's the room where we meet to play. It's where things happen and where we present our characters; where we can have an adventure or a conversation together. *De Profundis* is letters.

A letter is a very specific form of interpersonal contact. Different from face-to-face encounters and talking. In a conversation, our thoughts often trail off halfway through a sentence, impulsively, and superficiality slips into the dialogue. In letters, we have the opportunity to say everything we have to say from the beginning right to the end. We have plenty of time to phrase our thoughts so they'll sound exactly like we want them to. The art of letter writing is ancient, and despite recently becoming fashionable again, it has this unique air of antiquity, close to the works of 19th and early 20th century writers. Not to mention Lovecraft himself, whose life was composed mostly of browsing old books and writing letters.

But you know all this better than I do, and I was going to write about something else. I've received a *De Profundis* letter from Darek, from your Society. And, well, it's a decent short story – but...

Remind your group that there are certain rules concerning the structure and layout of letters. Otherwise, the credibility of those letters is lost, despite all their great ideas, atmosphere, and style. Draw their attention to the fact that a letter to a stranger, say, recommended by a third party (as was the case here) is one thing, a letter to an old acquaintance from years ago is another; weekly correspondence between good friends differs from both; and a formal exchange of thoughts between two respectful but not acquainted scholars is something different again.

When you write to someone for the first time, you must introduce yourself.

However, if we assume the characters in the Society we've founded have known each other for ages, that's no longer necessary. So, as we write that opening letter to start the game off, we can assume this isn't the beginning of our correspondence at all – we might even make reference to earlier, non-existing letters.

Next, letters must be hand-written, or possibly typed on an old typewriter. It's also worth using a fountain pen instead of a more modern one – this shows we respect the addressee and put real effort into our letters. As you can see, I'm writing to you in brown ink myself. And – by the way – while we're on the subject of letters, we've been experiencing lots of weird things happening lately. They're nothing more than playing *De Profundis*, aren't they?

Besides, even though you know full well, make sure your group does, too: their letters should begin with traditional greetings (Dear Grzegorz, To Whom It May Concern, Sir!) and end in a farewell and signature.

One more important thing: dates! If some time from now you gather all these letters together and want to read them again, reconstruct your correspondence, dates are the only key to doing so in the right order. Otherwise, you're in for a struggle. Believe me, I know. Been there, done that.

Now – about the appearance of your handwriting, and styling it to fit the situation. The handwriting of a calm and collected scientist committing his thoughts and results to paper is one thing, but that of a frightened victim of a haunting, or of someone's last words written down in frantic haste in spasms of terror – in the face of imminent death – is quite another. However, regardless of how we style our writing, we need to try and write clearly. Never mind the need to write clearly in standard, calm correspondence; the charm will soon fade if we have to wade through illegible chaos, guessing at the simplest words scrawled like unfathomable hieroglyphs.

I could go on forever about the specific styles of letters and diaries, on the tricks that let you express emotion, atmosphere and mood; but this, to a great extent, is precisely the crux of playing *De Profundis*. Discovering these secrets and tricks is a lot of fun, and gratifying in its own right. As far as the basic structuring of your train of thought in letters, travel diaries, etc, is concerned, all the short stories and novels of the 19th and early 20th centuries like *Frankenstein* or *Dracula* are a great help.

## PS

One more thing: email. No email! This will kill the atmosphere stone dead. Unless someone deliberately wants to play using a different convention from the other two, and create a vision of today's world with its Internet, its hurrying around, cell phones, great rushing streams of information, exchanges of brief electronic messages full of verbal static, acronyms, computer slang and the like. This kind of thing would let them create a world straight out of *Conspiracy Theory* or *The X-Files*. But the ease and convenience which the Internet tempts us with are deceptive. If, through sheer laziness, using email prevents you from savouring the game in its traditional paper form, be careful: communicating and expressing one's thoughts on paper is *totally* different from e-mail. A letter requires effort, takes your time, your concentration.



It's a sign of your respect for the addressee, too. Email is slapdash trash, full of mistakes, sometimes just tacking a few rushed comments on the end of thoughtlessly quoted fragments from a previous message. Let those who use email as their standard form of communication have a rest from their computers in the evenings when they're playing *De Profundis*. Either way, be wary about email, as it distorts communication and our attitude to the addressee.

## Psyche and Action.....2nd June, 1999

You're not going to believe this. Last night I had this grotesque, almost funny, dream, where I had a conversation with Nyarlathotep – a conversation about art. His priest, who was some sort of musician, had summoned him. From what I saw, I'd say he found the priest's slowness and laziness very disappointing. Still, Nyarlathotep is very understanding towards artists. I was amazed to learn how many bands of musicians, how many writers and painters, all seemed to enjoy his protection. When he was leaving, I felt the priest was now doomed. However, I also sensed some fondness in him for my work. Then I saw huge four-headed dragons outside, smashing buildings into pieces, rooting out and devouring people. The more a dragon ate, the more it grew inflated, until it burst. Just a dream. Funny: what if this is exactly how you make a pact with madness? When you're unconscious, where your conscious mind isn't there to shield you. Free from fear, simply in peaceful, whimsical slumber.

I do hope it was just a dream, and all its fears and suspicions just come from my imagination.

That's another thing I wanted to write about today. In *De Profundis* letters, what does it mean to commit your innermost experiences to paper, and what does it mean when it comes to writing about physical action?

I mentioned before that *De Profundis* is something like an alternative – or a counterweight – to role-playing, making room for what (despite the indignation lots of players would feel when reading this) role-playing games do not do justice to: the domain of the thoughts, experiences and reflections of our characters. Indeed, the form of *De Profundis* almost forces us to focus inside the mind, and has great potential for this kind of activity. But man cannot live on thought alone: this realm of inner experience is inseparably linked to the world we live in, the events we take part in and people we encounter. And fears and suspicions are usually about something outside us: often, they're a way of perceiving the world, not the things which exist independently inside our heads. How long can you write only about the horrors in your skull?

So in *De Profundis* 'action' is as important as emotion – but 'action' is only a pretext for expressing thought. In *De Profundis*, if we – as players – decide to explore an old church at night, it's not (as it would be in a role-playing game) to *find* something weird there: it's to *experience* something weird there. To have something to think and write about afterwards. In role-playing, at any given moment we're more interested in what the character is doing, can do, has found, than what they feel and think. Naturally, the form of a role-playing game suggests more action. But in *De Profundis* 'action' is a thousand times more subtle, and as it usually can only be experienced by one person – the letter's author – it's always perceived subjectively. In role-playing games, the game master gives an 'objective' description of events and places, so that all players can perceive them in the same way. In *De Profundis*, that's not necessary. Here, as we explore the dungeons beneath those ruins hidden in the forest, we're actually exploring our own psyche. Even objectively dry and clean columns may be rotten, slimy and blasphemous: the world is as we see it, and how we see it is affected by our emotions, personality, experiences, psyche, or even our personal madness. What do algae and jellyfish mean to someone who dreams of sunken R'lyeh each night?

Something we wouldn't even notice in a traditional role-playing session is the core of the game here (and of Lovecraft's stories as well) – suspicions, dreams, allusions, inner transformations, reflections, discovering one's own roots...

...and, sometimes, action. In the right time and place, to the right degree. HPL deals with action in his works as follows: for three quarters of a story we read the narrator's memories, his diary or letters, where he writes about his suspicions and the progress he's made investigating some mystery; until finally he reaches the climax and realises he's just crossed over the edge. Only then does he leave for some place, where all hell breaks loose and where he faces the horror that has so far haunted him only in his dreams. In *De Profundis*, this might look more or less as follows: the first two or three letters introduce the reader subtly to the subject of the mystery; in the following few, the author reveals more and more secrets, his personality undergoes changes, his exhaustion increases as do his fears, until finally a letter comes announcing he has decided to leave and search for the source of the mystery. After that there might perhaps arrive some last letter sent shortly before his death – the climactic point of the whole exchange. Or perhaps letters containing his journal, written down after his return. This is just an example of one of the many possible patterns which might be followed in a campaign.

It's also important to add that each of the two suggested *De Profundis* periods implies a different emphasis on action. In 'the Twenties' there's more literary convention, more fiction, and we play either made up or Lovecraft characters. So, in 'the Twenties' there's more room for sensational or extraordinary events, for adventure and travel.



'Here and now', on the other hand, imposes realism: the universe exists tangibly in the streets outside or in the newspapers, and we can play ourselves. This gives more room to experiences, thinking things over, paranoia and conspiracy theory, and much less to fantastic events or, consequently, action.

Right. I'll sign off now, because it's impossible to stay indoors. It's so stuffy and close, I can hardly breathe. Everything is sticky. I'll have a walk in the woods before the storm comes this evening. It happens almost every day now, as soon as it gets dark, thunder and lightning. By the way – when did you last go walking in the woods?



## What shall I write about? .....24th June, 1999

Last time I sent some comments on the style of our letters. This time I'm going to discuss possible types of plots (in other words, 'scenarios') for *De Profundis* sessions. Below you'll find examples of things our correspondence campaigns may be built around and how they might be structured. Let's make a list.



### *1. The mythos around us.*

We pick one particular Lovecraftian myth or race for our character. Then we concentrate on it, make it our nightmare. We become experts in this particular myth, venturing farther than anyone else before. It's much more believable if a character unearths one mystery over many years than if they solve one 'unexplained case' after another like in a TV series. That single subject becomes our story; our research and adventures are built around it. That's why *De Profundis* doesn't need a bestiary: we can find what we need in Lovecraft, and the rest we create ourselves. A single player can explore a subject deeper than anyone has ever dreamed, and it could be completely different from any canon description, and much stranger. It could be something no one else knows.



### *2. A mysterious event.*

This is the beginning of a nightmare. Maybe we play an innocent person who's encountered a mystery by accident, and which now marks them forever. Dark beings and secrets begin to appear around them, and they themselves begin to change. Maybe they're looking for answers, or simply confiding their fears and suspicions to someone.



### *3. Conspiracy theory.*

Our character may be an 'initiated' seeker of the Truth who's devoted their whole life to finding and confirming the tiniest traces of, say, Mi-Go presence in the world or in our country. Of course, as the research proceeds, the character's paranoia gradually rises until at some point they 'understand everything', realising who the secret governmental agencies people are, who controls the politicians, the media, etc.



### *4. Thoughts, reflections, investigations.*

We can work in a field of science such as physics, psychology, history or biology, or immerse ourselves in occult books, determined to find hints and mentions of Lovecraft's mythos. Some of them have been studied and elaborated on by modern scientists, and are no longer a mad writer's fiction. It would be worth giving it a try: doing some research and then sharing one's conclusions.



Many an initiated seeker has wondered about the connections between legends of Flying Polyps and desert jinn, or between the Shoggoth myth, tumours, and the mystery of life.



### **5. *Research and experiments.***

Poring over books, we can take down notes to include or quote large excerpts in our letters. There's no reason why we shouldn't create fictitious sources or books ourselves, or carry out experiments in imaginary laboratories and later write reports about our results. The only problem is maintaining credibility; this probably requires considerable knowledge of the discipline in question.



### **6. *Adventures.***

Besides research, thoughts and investigations, we can describe in our correspondence the expeditions, actions, experiences of the last few days or from the more distant past, unexplained events we've encountered. In this case, we describe things after our return: either only when we've relaxed a little, or as soon as everything is over. There's another way, too: to take notes, using the right moments to write down our comments, either memoir-style or in a quick and journalistic style. Naturally not when running or in the dark, not in the middle of some action or when swimming, but, for example, on a train or while resting in the moist chamber of some dungeon.



### **7. *Letters from our travels.***

These are a special combination of action and reflection. The travels should be long expeditions, lasting months or at least weeks.



### **8. *Family stories.***

How many mystery stories have we heard from our grandparents, parents, elderly neighbours and other dwellers in the past? Ghosts, phantoms, vampires, witches, devils, haunted houses, cursed places, legendary ancestors, sorcerers... Old people love scaring children with stories like these. Remember them. Or try to listen to them again, and collect them if you can. Sure enough, some are just figments of granddad's or grandma's imagination, but that doesn't matter much. What matters is a good story, which could be a perfect starting point for your *De Profundis* campaign. There may be a grain of truth in every legend: today, you can look at those stories again, letting them slowly draw you into their depths, looking for their roots, investigating the historical background and details, rummaging through the past. After all, this story isn't just any old story: it's yours, your roots. Who were they, really, your ancestors? What did they do? And you, yourself, who are you?



## 9. Landscapes.

Another important element is place descriptions. Our immediate surroundings usually seem boring and not worth describing to us. But take a different point of view: our addressee has no idea how humdrum they are. To him, our neighbourhood may even be exotic. Myself, I live in a 'quiet', anonymous district of blocks of flats, with forests to the horizon outside my windows to the south. When we were children we found deep in this forest a lonely decaying tombstone from before World War I. Ten years ago or so, we had packs of wild dogs running wild round here, each pack with ten to twenty hungry, aggressive animals. A huge sign used to hang above the stained glass doors to our church saying 'The Gate to Paradise'. I could go on like this for ages, listing things most of the locals around here never notice or pay any attention to. And it's just one of innumerable such districts, ordinary and grey.

It would be a great experience to me to read letters from someone who lives by the sea, in the mountains or woods, near the eastern borders or the lakeland region. Or even the big cities and small towns: each has its own spirit; each is different and worth describing. And each hides secrets. If only the author took full advantage of the potential of where he lives, whether it's a fishy smell coming from the seashore, or the call of something in the depths; whether drunkards telling strange stories in port alleys; or the postman coming to fetch our letters across golden fields of corn, where mysterious will-o'-the-wisps wander at night; then our familiar country would change into a land as full of secrets as Lovecraft's New England.

Everybody lives in surroundings that are normal and ordinary to them, but exotic to others, and it would be a shame not to use this fact.



## 10. Topics based on Book Two and Book Three.

While *De Profundis* is mostly about writing and reading letters, there's also room for other, non-correspondence psychodrama. If the players are to be totally absorbed in another world, they need the next two books of *De Profundis*, which I'll give you shortly. Their role is to fill two kinds of 'empty space' in our players' lives: moments of solitude, and time spent travelling. Playing *De Profundis* shouldn't just boil down to those moments of concentration when we're writing the letters, because if it does, the letters will become forced, losing some of their quality, authenticity and atmosphere. It's maybe similar to what happens to a painter sitting down to a blank canvas, when he suddenly feels the emptiness in his head, and all his inspiration vanishes. Something paralyses him. So, when you settle down to write a letter, you need to know what you're going to write about. We write our Letters from the Abyss not because it's our turn and we *ought* to write something, but because we have something important to say: sensational news, discoveries, adventures, experiences.



In other words, *De Profundis* has to start not just as we're about to write our letter, but much earlier. Every day, almost every moment, we're playing, in some part of our minds, watching our reality, our surroundings closely in a specific way: through the lens of *De Profundis*. We play as we walk down the street, take a bus, look out of a window, etc. I'll describe this in my next letters about the two other books. However, it's worth mentioning now that the topics of our letters come primarily from playing those two other forms of psychodrama, even though this first form is most crucial to the game. The other two fuel it; in them, we experience everything we later, with appropriate modifications, describe. Sometimes we won't even have to change anything. You spend your evenings locked in your room with some hot tea and papers before you, reading the letter you've received, writing down your adventures, visiting libraries. From your bus you see gloomy houses, strange-looking places... You're playing *De Profundis*. If we make good use of reality, try to see it in the right light, pick out the details and then describe them (modified and brought together in the right way), we get something we couldn't just make up completely on our own. Just sitting at a desk and wondering what to write about, we'd never come up with scenes, places, plots, atmosphere like these. The things we write about have to surprise and captivate even us.



### 11. Normal letters.

At some point in the game, we can afford to play in an even more subtle way. For example, we could have a perfectly normal correspondence with someone else for some time, so that something would start lurking in the background only later, and then, slowly, a horror would be born. But this normal correspondence should still get enough of our effort to be interesting, absorbing, and still have some of the game's atmosphere. Finding a good reason for such a correspondence, one that convinces the other player, is hard work. Its letters must be masterpieces, and written with intuition.

Of course, the categories above are only for convenience, and specific letters or campaigns will contain elements of all of them, as well as lots of others. Probably even now you have some ideas this list doesn't even hint at. Could you write them down and send them to me in a letter? Or not – keep them for yourself, so you have something to surprise me with in the middle of a *De Profundis* campaign.

When you're planning appropriate topics for a series of letters to create an atmosphere similar to Lovecraft's work, look closely at his stories. It's much easier to fish things out from them which are useful for *De Profundis* than it is for traditional role-playing games, as the principles of traditional role-playing games are quite different from those of literature. Of course, your letters needn't be based just on HPL: they may make use of any horror, or even non-horror.

Phew... I've gone on so much I've not really given you time to note down your own ideas. Sorry: I've recently been churning out my writing, barely pausing for breath. I wake up early in the morning and sit down to write straight away. I stop late at night. I work best in the darkness, though there's too little of it now. That reminds me – how was your Midsummer? Anyway – happy brainstorming. See you.

## Realism and Atmosphere Above All.....2nd July, 1999

Do you remember the old handouts we used in our first horror role-playing sessions, the typescripts, the letters and diaries? Or even earlier, the ones we made just to read and feel real mystery and terror, back in the days when we hadn't yet discovered role-playing and just played *Fatal Labyrinth* and Atari games?

We made those documents and manuscripts to feel authentic, and didn't bother about orthography or style. Only one thing mattered: atmosphere! To hold in your hand one of those diaries Lovecraft wrote about, and feel our world wasn't grey, ordinary, or humdrum. That was something...

You know, that's also what *De Profundis* is about. *Exactly* what it's about. Do you remember that mystery by which your imagination transformed the world into a place of magic? The purpose of this game is to achieve an overwhelming sense of atmosphere, realism, fear. It's supposed to make us forget our everyday lives for a while, and see another, hidden reality behind the world. Our letters should make the addressee believe everything we've written is true. We prepare him gradually, step by step, letter by letter. Realism and an atmosphere of mystery or horror don't always go together: sometimes you have to sacrifice one for the other. However, let maximum realism remain the primary criterion for your letters. As you describe events in your letter, imagine *this is not a game*. Try to feel as if everything you're writing or going to write about is for real. Try, even if it costs you. Get your imagination going, forget the world. Cross the line between game and reality. Maybe suddenly you'll realise not everything you've written looks right; maybe you'll crumple your sheet of paper and start again, because you feel what it really means to write the *Truth*, a truth so terrible and incredible that words can't express it. Suddenly you're not writing a story any more; it's not fiction. And you commit to paper real terror and real mystery, you create a real Letter from the Abyss, one everybody, absolutely everybody without exception, will have to believe. It's better to write about a patch of shadow or a claw mark, (but to make it so convincing that your addressee shudders in his chair), than it is to describe terrifying adventures and eerie scenes, but make them feel like a light-hearted story.



It's not about writing a good story or playing an interesting game; it's about blurring the line between what we write and reality. We need to pay attention to every detail: these are the only real rules of *De Profundis*. When you can't keep going and start slipping into burlesque or artificiality, put the pen down and go out. You'll come back to it tomorrow, maybe even today, but not now. Read and listen carefully to the real stories people tell, especially the way they sometimes try to describe something extraordinary, incredible. Do the same with the stories told by your grandparents. Then, to get some feel for the Lovecraftian style, read Zadok Allen's story in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. It's written in colloquial, careless, street language. Non-literary, clumsy, but relatively realistic, it's in sharp contrast to the rest of the story.

I don't think I need to add that there's no room in Letters from the Abyss for extraneous, out-of-game comments like 'Okay – and did you have a nice Cthulucon?' The letter must stick to the convention from beginning to the end; from the first to last letter, including the coffee stain and creased corner.

That just leaves the unbeliever. Now, if a player chooses to play a sceptic who never believes anything they haven't understood or seen with their own eyes, they still have to ensure they don't spoil the atmosphere the others are building. Even an unbeliever can be played so they contribute to the game's realism, being a star of the session and not its disgrace, as sometimes happens with non-gamers when they try role-playing. It's a question of intuition and feel, of course: when the sceptic insists on denying the mysterious, and fights the Truth until they finally succumb, that's wonderful; but if the sceptic's player limits themselves to jokes or mocking remarks, it's just a mess.

You probably remember that idiot Max, who smirked all the way through that session because he thought he'd make a good impression with his 'adult attitude', detachment and cynicism. Then think of Michal's excellent acting when he played Mr Gabriel, an elderly gentleman who'd believe nothing and remain rational and sceptical even in the face of obviously paranormal phenomena.

I've been able to get out a little recently, but each time I come back quickly and carry on writing. But now I think I'm going to call it a day. I'll just make up a table for the chapter on character archetypes. It's two a.m. Raindrops are pattering on the windowsill. The bright disc of the moon now shows itself, now disappears again, suspended in the dark blue night sky. Maybe I won't go to bed tonight. I have so many ideas, and so much time till dawn.

## Interaction.....9th July, 1999

No! Don't go there! Don't! I'd rather go to Brudnice myself and check your theory out than let you do something so reckless. You don't know anyone in the village, and I have family there. You don't know the woods either; you don't even suspect how huge they are, how easy it is to lose your way in there and never come out. I promise I'll go myself and write to you about it all afterwards. Just as soon as the weather clears up and summer arrives. Because at the moment it's warm in the morning up until noon, but in the afternoon the wind gets up, and it gets cold and dark and starts raining. What can anyone do in the country in this weather? If only it were like it is now all the time: a pleasant warm breeze, a little sun, not too hot but not cold either. And those beautiful bright clouds in the blue sky. But tomorrow it'll most likely pour down again.

I'm writing a chapter on 'interaction' for *De Profundis*. Interaction is extremely important. You know what the problem is, don't you? Remember that correspondence psychodrama takes place between two or more people, and both sides have to participate in the adventure being created. The person you write to shouldn't just function as a passive receiver of our ideas, a mailbox for collecting stories. You need to avoid the situation in which both parties write only about their own activities and adventures, ignoring everything mentioned by the other player. Playing with such self-obsessed people soon becomes boring, stops making sense, then just finally withers away. We need to build our story together; our letters need to be closely interconnected, influencing and shaping the other person's letters in turn. That's the heart of psychodrama. Both *the call* and *the response* matter. You have to show interest in your correspondent and their experiences, and not just go 'I will, I have, I could...' Responding to the issues brought up by the other player has to take up as much of the letter as presenting your own.

Even then, each time letters are exchanged, the active and passive correspondents will most likely be obvious. By that, I mean that while at this stage of the game one player may be reporting on their own adventures, their increased activity and strange events, it would be polite for the other player to slow down a little and assume the role of their confidant and commentator. This is because we don't want artificial and dubious situations cropping up. For example, let's say one player describes the forces of evil closing in on their house, people dying, shadows roaming around, and then receives in reply a similar dose of horror, maybe a confession from a frightened archaeologist saying something moved into his home when he brought back a mysterious statuette from Iraq. A story of strange events and adventures is much more interesting and realistic if it happens only to one player at a time.



Meanwhile, the other lives a peaceful life: reads books, thinks a lot, verifies certain facts, explores details, advises, comments, asks questions, answers, shares his knowledge etc. Or maybe they intervene in their correspondent's plot, accept and start working with some of the facts stated in their letters and expand on them at their own place, now playing the main role in them. But this has to be done carefully, to avoid players creating contradictory facts. And, of course, the passive player can write down any of his experiences; he just should avoid having too much action in them. Then, when the active player slows down, the other will speed up.

Your head's doubtless full of dozens of tricks and gambits now, like 'selling' a thread to another player, denying things, arguing, giving the other players a scenario to work with, drawing others into your adventures. You can use tricks like that here just as well as in standard psychodrama, and there are plenty of them out there waiting to be found. I'm writing them down in my notebook: be ready for something special when we start playing.

## Pacing

21st July, 1999

The thing won't let me do anything else now. All I can do is write *De Profundis*. It's not rational, in the human sense; it's strange, alien. An incredibly developed form of intelligence, but completely incomprehensible. And I have to write. I don't know why, but it lets me weave words of warning between the lines. They'll probably work to its advantage anyway. First of all it wants me to finish the work and fully recreate the Hermit's book. But then what will happen when it's done? How much time do I have left?

I can't stop thinking about it. Time rushes by mercilessly: it's been months since I became obsessed with this vision of this game from a dream, and started to write. The pacing in a *De Profundis* campaign is like this, too: successive letters reveal more and more events from a character's life. One major difference between *De Profundis* and a traditional role-playing game is the long intervals of time. Here, in one letter, we only mention something; later in another we add a few more details and some interpretation, modifying the inner state of the character too; yet another introduces more events, and so on. The action unfolds slowly, we expand on various plot threads, create scenarios for our letters, deliberately compose themes in the privacy of our home, alone and focussed. We create the plot itself by a long, slow process of investigation, experiences and inner transformation in mind, planning it over many months; and so the plot is very different from that of a traditional RPG.

And this crawling, whispering madness from the marshes toys with me in just the same way. It disappears, then comes back again, stronger; and when I think the end is near – it's gone. But it doesn't know that as soon as I finish I'll burn everything and no one will ever know. What you have is only part of the game, a mere sketch. I write, obeying that powerful voice, but I hide my real thoughts and intentions in a thick fog, the mixture of truth, lies and fiction that is *De Profundis*.

The sky is stained, and the stains are bright, watery, white or sky blue. Sometimes a great, dark, rain cloud. Do you see?

## The Conspiracy

31st July, 1999

It's so hot! And so close, too. Before the sudden storms and rain showers, a strong wind blows up, tossing dirt and leaves around. The storms are short, fleeting.

I've given your address to several of my players, so one or more of them will probably write to you soon. So I'd like to discuss the rules about exchanging addresses between players in the *De Profundis* network. First, it must fit the game context – it shouldn't happen just like that, for no valid reason. If, for example, one of your correspondents is looking for some specific information on the culture of Ancient Egypt, and another is an archaeologist or a historian, you'll want to introduce them. In one of your letters write that you know someone who could probably help with this particular question, someone who'll know or have experienced something relevant. Give their name and a brief description, and don't forget their correspondence address.

So, second point: addresses. As you pointed out once, the name and address of the player which you write on the envelope is usually different from the name and place of residence of the character they're playing. It's a form of conspiracy: hiding, concealed in the world, correspondents from various Societies use pseudonyms and fake addresses when dealing with their mail. The ignorant never notice, but the conspirators know each other's true identities.

One way of getting into the great network of *De Profundis* is to gradually get in touch with people, first just through one correspondent, who can later recommend other people to us or us to other people. When recommending people we have to be careful not to mix the two periods of the game by providing a contemporary character with the address of someone living in the early 20th century!

One more thing: one of my correspondents has recently disappeared. He left, accepting an invitation from someone he'd exchanged a few letters with, some other player. And he hasn't come back yet. There's been no contact with him at all. So be careful: this is no LARP. It's deadly serious.



## Metamorphosis and End.....9th August, 1999

Wet and grey, like every day. It's been drizzling all day, with a little wind. And this is supposed to be summer? There's some pale sun around noon, it's cold in the morning and at night. The *De Profundis* plague is spreading. Darkness, rain and depression have a lot to do with it, too.

Do you remember Grzegorz? There is no Grzegorz now, not any more. Now he's someone else. I'm scared. It began just like an interesting game. Where is this thorn that oozes venom and madness? Do you remember Marcin, who left? I wrote about him last time. Well, he's back. But he's not himself. They've changed; they are strangers. Smiling, they live in a different world now, one we can't see.

That's right. Metamorphosis, inner transformation is, for every character, the essence of *De Profundis*. Lovecraft used to write about it all the time. Pickman, the ghoul painter, who metamorphoses slowly and finally becomes one himself so as to plumb its mysteries to the uttermost, to cross the final line – he knows the Unknowable. Juan Romero, about whose metamorphosis we actually know nothing definite at all. Arthur Jermyn, with his obsessive interest in an ancient civilisation from the jungles of Darkest Africa. Randolph Carter, unlocking the greatest mysteries of reality. Joe Slater, climbing the forbidden walls of dreams. Iranon, whose beautiful dreams died in a single day. The descendant of the Innsmouth marshes, discovering his terrifying legacy. They all underwent weird, frightening transformations. For many of them, these transformations ended in death.



Death. Another theme emphasised by Lovecraft. In *De Profundis*, the death of a character deserves a special place of its own. It's one of the ways we can bring our campaign to a conclusion, an uncanny end in a horrific climax, surrounded by blasphemous events. But first, you need to understand that in *De Profundis* death is part of the game, and has nothing to do with failure. It must be an act of departing in great style, with a classiness worthy of HPL's stories. The final masterstroke, worthy of crowning our long adventure. It must, in a sense, complete the story we've been creating for months: it must be a work of art. I have a number of ideas and suggestions for that 'Final Letter'. Here are a few of them.



### ***A terrified letter:***

Last notes, hardly legible, clumsy writing, full of fear, expecting the end, final flashes of understanding. For a diary or journal, you can write right up to the very end, complete with the discontinued sentence and that last spasmodic line. For an actual letter you still have to take into account the fact that it must be posted in some way.



### ***A farewell letter:***

Written before you go out to do something extremely dangerous, or while you're waiting for the unexpected, before leaving our world (as was the case with Carter), or before destroying yourself.



### ***A break:***

Breaking the correspondence suddenly, so that the context of the previous letters allows the other correspondent to guess the meaning of the silence. You might even try a total mystification: return the letters addressed to the character back to the sender, or even send a shocking notification. Or you could write again after a long delay, reporting on what prevented you from replying (see *The Whisperer in Darkness*).



### ***Torn out pages:***

This applies only to diaries and journals. The last pages have been torn out and all you can read is a few puzzling words on the edges.

What do you think? I know you'd probably do it differently yourself. Final letters like these aren't only about their content, they're also about their style. They should be perfect in every detail, so that a clever reader should be able to detect a change in the correspondent, deduce that something is wrong from their handwriting, choice of words, various nuances. For letters written outdoors you can use a pencil, which (unlike a pen) doesn't smudge when wet.



One more thing: when we play ourselves, we should avoid experiences which are too extreme, too drastic, especially death. Of course it's all just fiction, just literature, but we shouldn't go too over the top. On the other hand, if we're playing an invented, fictitious character, we can really let loose and come up with incredible scenes and confessions that will really affect the reader.

## Parcels, Diaries and the Like.....21st August, 1999

I've received another letter – or rather a diary. But is it actually fictitious, though? I'm beginning to doubt it. It's getting harder to tell fictitious letters, the products of our imaginations, from real letters from the real world. Having said that, it wouldn't actually make that much difference if our reality turned out to be just as nightmarish as we describe it in our *De Profundis* letters: the two types of letters would just be the same. They'd just all be Letters from the Abyss.

It's sunny, hot, muggy. At night there are usually thunderstorms, otherwise it's scorchingly hot.

I've written lots of times about things like interaction, letter structure, and so on; things that apply when two people exchange letters. However, I want to stress that this isn't the only way of playing *De Profundis*. You could choose to play as a complete loner, an extreme outsider, someone who doesn't really take part in any correspondence. Only under the influence of very specific experiences and events will a person like that decide to send one or more letters with their confessions to someone who might be interested, in a kind of 'blind communication'. These 'Recluse Letters' are primarily soliloquies, a sort of diary, and their authors don't expect replies. A terrified Recluse sends his letters like a castaway throwing messages in bottles into the sea, calling for help. But these letters have to be interesting enough for other players to want to read them, take them into account, etc. In this kind of experiment, when we don't expect a letter in reply, we can put a totally fictitious address on the envelope, or simply send the letter anonymously.

Another option for a *De Profundis* session is to write a diary or journal, which you might then send to someone later, together with some relevant information. A hand-written diary according to the horror convention, a thick notebook filled with text, unique, existing in only one copy, is a priceless treasure for the recipient. You can use lots of interesting tricks and techniques in it, such as torn out pages: you did something like that ages ago, with your amazing diary about your trip to a haunted house. Or you could include plenty of drawings, lots more than you'd put in a letter.

A manuscript like that is so much more than just a story: it radiates incomparable magic and atmosphere. At the same time, it illustrates a new trend in art which has been developing for some time: small works (like painstakingly hand-crafted letters) created with only one person in mind. Perhaps no one other than the addressee will ever see the labour and effort that went into the work, no one else will ever see the result. Just think how much respect that shows for the person receiving it! Isn't that a sharp contrast with modern trends in mass-produced pseudo-art, which is really just a product made for sale?

The same applies to letter writing too, though of course a letter is generally much shorter than a diary and requires much less effort. Even so, some players may not be happy with one of their amazing ideas being seen by just one specific recipient and no one else. They could copy the letter; they could send the same idea, story or letter to a number of correspondents, introducing small changes to suit each copy to its recipient. They should make sure the letter fits into the broader context of the correspondence with that person, but that shouldn't be a problem. That way you can send almost identical (but not absolutely identical) things to more than one friend.

And while we're on the subject of alternative techniques for *De Profundis* letters, we shouldn't forget parcels! Posting a parcel is relatively cheap, and the result may be electrifying. If you put inside, say, some weird stone or mysterious statuette, an old rare book or a phial containing some strange powder, and enclose a letter referring to the item and highlighting some details, just think what kind of atmosphere that will create! You could of course enclose smaller objects, even newspaper clippings or photographs, in your ordinary letters, too.



There've been a lot of dogs barking outside lately. There's some pagan festival coming – a festival of Diana. I get this feeling something strange is about to happen.



## Keep Your Letters!.....31st August, 1999

The days are cold, pale and wet again, but I've been feeling strangely cheerful, as if all the things going on around here no longer really apply to me. The streets are awash with water. A hellish, hellish – really, literally and honestly hellish – storm struck the city last night. There was constant thunder, blinding lightning lighting up the sky. The wind and rain nearly tore the shutters off buildings. At one point I thought it would never end. The worst of it lasted three hours. Now, in the daylight, you can see the storm damage. I'm sitting at my desk, looking through my letters.

Well, well. Our correspondence has made a pretty sizeable pile of letters. And it's not over yet.

And when it is, what then? Well, the letters will still be there.

Never throw away any *De Profundis* letters! More than that – try to copy, however you can, each letter before you send it. You'll need all the correspondence, both your letters and those from other players. Need? What for? So you can put them together to make one long text, a complete, hyper-realistic story! Weird, Lovecraftian, atmospheric, long, complex... I could go on. A story, written by several authors, composed of *De Profundis* letters. All you have to do is combine them into one text! That's one of the reasons you should always date each letter: later, it'll help you easily put them in order. Don't forget that when the campaign is over, that kind of collection will make a fantastic memento.

Copying letters is a frequent practice even in ordinary correspondence. When we regularly exchange letters with a person, we write each letter twice. We put one in a box, pigeon-holed for that person, and post the other. When we get a reply, we refresh our memory from the letter we sent, and then read the one we've just received. That way you can keep on top of the continuity of your correspondence, see which of your questions have been answered, which topics referred to.

So let's get playing and create some stories!

Let's play! Let's play! Let the *thing* grow and spread! We'll let it into our world, let it out among the people, the masses! Then we'll publish a collection: *De Profundis* ! There'll be lots of copies – they'll reach everyone, everywhere, every home! Then there'll be a film! This insanity will reap its harvest! May the crawling madness of Nyarl seize the whole world!



che doppie cura,  
del commercio tempo sufficiente per fermare un



# Book Two

p h a n t a s m a g o r i a

## Field Psychodrama.....11th September, 1999

It's gone. Is it all over? Maybe it did what it came to do and moved on, reached out into the world, and it's now out there, with other people who've taken up the game and are carrying it on? Has it got to you yet? Can you feel it?

The mornings are still sunny, but then it gets cold and dark. You can smell winter coming. Last night, I was walking back home through the neighbourhood. Suddenly, I heard the distant shrieking of a factory, one of those factories that fill the horizons of our filthy cities. If you really listen to what people in the city call *silence*, you can hear a cacophony of noises that normally we're never even aware of. Grindings, hummings, roarings, shriekings... A factory, shrieking. Nothing unusual about it; you hear the echoing rumbling, pounding, grinding of the city every day, so loud you can hear it miles away. Nothing unusual. Or is it? Maybe there's a being from outside the dimensions we know of, larger than any animal on Earth, imprisoned in that vast factory? Maybe the shriek that shakes the city from time to time comes from its throat, rather than from metal gantries grating together? Maybe you could even see where that horror dwells from your own window...? Maybe you can't see it, because you're blinded by your everyday habits, satisfied with the widely accepted trivialities that explain the purpose of every building and each sound the city makes? Locked in an immense chamber, the beast howls at the top of its voice, and we never pay any attention. They're just the noises of the city.

Do you want to become aware of that other world?

Sit by your window and inspect your neighbourhood carefully, right to the horizon. Find a tall building and look closely at your city. Watch it, and think as Zadok Allen did in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, or like Robert Blake in *The Hunter of the Dark*.

Place a *Filter* in front of your eyes, so that you can see the real face of the world.

Afterwards, when you go out and take a walk or ride a bus, watch carefully again. Keep watching. Until you see it.

I promised you I'd write about the mystery of Filters one day, those things which change our perception of reality. Sometimes the line between reality and imagination blurs; sometimes we can see things most people never even notice. And sometimes we can see, or rather recognise, *Those Who See*. And then they can see us, too.

Have you ever gritted your teeth in frustration and helplessness when you've tried to explain role-playing to a non-gamer, and kept running into a wall of incomprehension? Sometimes people's imaginations are blocked. 'What do you mean? You sit round a table, and at the same time you're exploring dungeons, forests and cities? Without a board, without a computer? Can you see these things or what?' It's hard to explain the essence of role-playing to someone who's totally unfamiliar with it or anything like it. Get ready to swap roles, because I'm going to show you a way of playing different from traditional role-playing, maybe different from anything you've ever played.

It's called *field psychodrama*. It's for one or more people.

It's a board game. The board is the world around us, reality, everything we can see. A street. A neighbourhood. A corridor in a cellar. The inside of a bus. The inside of a picture hanging on the wall. The view from a window.

Concentrate and unleash the figments of your imagination on the world. Let them combine. Superimpose them on the reality you see. Superimpose them like you superimpose two images to create a composite photo. Create a *composite reality* by combining it with your imagination. Play on the board of your surroundings with pieces from inside your mind. See it. Play it, experience it and describe it. Make actual space-time collide with imagination. Find the source of your dreams.

What you see and experience will be much more shocking and incredible than if you played in your imagination alone. Within the confines of our homes we could never make the scenery this authentic. Now the details of our grey everyday life loom before your eyes in their full tangibility and reality, side by side with horrors born in your mind.

The effect will be vague at first, and you'll be visualising. Then you'll get more experience in this new type of sensation, just like you once did with role-playing. The phantasmagoria will become more vivid, more clearly drawn on the board of the world where we move every day. They'll gain more colour, tangibility and depth; they'll fuse with your surroundings.

Do you remember this? One night we were going home from a role-playing session, and we passed a manhole. An empty part of town, dim yellow light from the street lamps, shadows like deep caves all around. Someone said, 'Hey, imagine if that



manhole cover moved, and a rotten arm came out from the sewers!' And then all of a sudden we saw it happen! That was field psychodrama. Listening to the story isn't enough to feel it: you had to be there then, fully present, and see it! Stand on the pavement in the dead of night, feel the cold wind on your face, see the black, starry sky above, the moon behind the white clouds lit up with its cold glow, rolling like ocean waves. Hear the crickets chirping and the frogs croaking in the distance. Smell the cold night. The point is precisely that it's not enough to imagine a scene like that: it must be *experienced*! You have to feel it with your fingers, see it with your own eyes, hear it with your own ears. Or at least most of it: everything that goes into it, except the one part born in your imagination which you add to the scene, superimpose on it. When real buildings, noises of the city, gusts of wind surround you, then the visualised scene hits you like a bullet. It becomes *real*.

We can summon visions from two different worlds at will. What if a Martian walker emerged from behind that block of flats right now? No! That's enough...

## The Horror at your Window.....17th September, 1999

It's late. I'm walking towards the bus stop, like I do every day. The star's been watching me for over a month. It shines next to the moon, as bright as it is. It hangs above me like it's waiting, emitting some silent but persistent message. It's pulsing. Whispering... I stand in the shadows, one of the few people travelling downtown this late. No one ever notices the star. Like they're blind...

Night. Night is a realm of imagination. Summon your phantasmagoria at night. When you're moving around the city, walking, driving, taking a bus, tram, tube or train. You can play during the day of course, too. But at night there's more of it; the whole world becomes mysterious, shot through with unreality, with the dream world. At night, wraiths and aliens and disguised, revolting races are abroad, hiding among people under cover of darkness.

Now I'm on the bus, halfway there. We stop. In the distance, I can see an empty, decrepit banger of a bus through the window: must be some night service to the middle of nowhere. Slowly, I summon the phantasmagoria, and begin to play. I'm still looking at that bus. Yes... I've seen it a few times. Never during the day; I've heard the route number isn't even on the schedule. An old, dark wreck of a bus, almost falling apart. It approaches its stop like it's alive, always pulling up a few metres outside the lamplight. Few people get on. What bus from hell is that? Who drives it, who are the passengers, where does it go? One day, I'll find out. I'll ask when I remember...

We're leaving the bus stop. A young child sits down next to me, quiet. The phantasmagoria... I didn't notice at first – just one more kid coming back home with his mum on the night bus. He was sitting close, the bus was crowded, and so I didn't notice anything. Until the third stop, when the five-year-old got off. Then I realised he'd been alone, that there was no mother with him, nobody! But he didn't look frightened or lost. Quite the opposite: a self-confident kid, even a bit aggressive, wild. Having got off the bus, he turned to watch it go, and grinned. I saw fangs like little daggers.

No, that's enough! We pass Chorzow's huge park, criss-crossed with paths and lanes, full of buildings, sculptures, ponds – a genuine maze of mysterious and hidden places. Going fast, we pass the broad alleys which disappear into the dark, leading up to the high bars of the zoological garden. All these things are invisible in the pitch dark; the few lights shine only on parts of the park's main drag. Now we go past a light, which looks like it's hovering in mid-air against the black back-drop of night. It must be a window in some cosy house hiding among the trees in the dark. But... just a minute... There aren't any buildings round here! I remember this part of the park is just this small hill overgrown with trees and weeds. I want to look more closely but there isn't time: the bus starts again and the light vanishes. I'll check tomorrow morning on my way back. Or some other night...

Next, we pass a monument looming in the blackness. Did I imagine it or did it just move? No – it must have been an optical illusion...

The best way to filter the reality around you is to evoke this state of controlled paranoia or schizophrenia. You see something, and say *this is it*. You see the secret background, the hidden side of the world, the real face of monsters and mysteries living in our world in disguise. You can see through it all, through all the camouflage. You start to notice details that have been hidden from you.

Now I'm walking down a dark alley. I walk past tenement houses, entrances and gates, then past some local tramp spending the night in a doorway. I turn my head to look at him again. But no! No one there...! How come? I saw him, I did – not a moment ago there was the black silhouette of a man there. Could I have imagined it?

Whenever you wander through the city, maybe through a park, all around you, within reach, there are themes and threads worthy of great mysteries and great adventures. You just have to grab one and unfold it. You summon the phantasmagoria, and the jaws of madness slowly yawn open...

I went to a nearby town this morning. I had an hour before my appointment and needed to do something with it, kill the time. So I walked down the main road for half an hour, then turned around and walked back, looking for an interesting shop,



maybe one with books. There was nothing. I went back to the place where I had my appointment, but there was still half an hour to go, so I walked down the same street again, and back. Only when I was walking that same stretch for the fourth time, looking around me attentively, did I suddenly see it. Only on the fourth time! Behind an old, crumbling stone wall, I saw the huge golden dome of a church. How could I have walked past these enormous ruins so close to the street and not noticed them? They were just behind the fence, some greenery, a row of dilapidated garages and sheds. It was like a spell had been cast on that ancient and imposing building, a spell to divert attention, make the church invisible to everyone passing by, even locals. Every time I'd passed this place, I only saw the foreground: the wall, the grass, the tarred roofs of the ramshackle sheds. Just slums. But how come I hadn't seen the old stone wall at the back, stretching as if it enclosed a park to that row of tenement buildings down the street? And behind that wall, among the trees, that round ancient building, a rotunda under a huge greenish dome. From the moment I saw it, the building pulled at me with an irresistible power – but the locals walking their dogs and people passing by saw none of it. When I asked later about the building on the bus, no one knew what I was talking about. And so I need to visit it myself, and walk through that arched gate in the stone wall.

Phantasmagoria can be a whole series of expeditions to the same place. Every time you go, you discover more details, collect new experiences and phantasmagoric adventures. You go back, write everything down in a letter or diary, and a few days later visit the place again. You can even take hurried field notes in a pocket notebook.

And this happens a lot...

It's night, and once again I'm walking down a dark alley between two rows of tenement buildings. A passer-by shuffles his feet in front of me. Suddenly I see his right hand, hidden in his coat sleeve, clench and change. It spreads three long, black, almost birdlike fingers... Three sharp claws stiffen, ready to tear at the nearest throat...

Have you heard that legend of a demon who can take over human hands? They become three-fingered, clawed...

Another time: I look in the bathroom mirror... No! I'm not going to write about that...

Have you noticed how they've dug up all over Katowice the last few months? Allegedly this is to help build that new motorway. They're dismantling bridges, pulling down streets, houses, whole rows of tenements. This is no motorway... they're looking for something...

One night, a strange tramp got on my bus. He was a tattered musician with a violin case. Unconsciously, everyone moved away from him, as if he was some kind of danger...

All you have to do is have your eyes wide-open and pick out those scraps from the other side of reality. Don't be fooled by that simplistic widespread paradigm that makes everyone else totally blind to anything that doesn't fit.

So do you know what phantasmagoria are now? Do you know the methods which this type of psychodrama uses? Try it out yourself, but bear in mind it'll probably be hard at first. Watch yourself pick potential themes out of your surroundings, watch the interpretations rise in your head, watch yourself take them further, expand them, develop them.

Do you know now how to write it all down afterwards?

Recently the sunsets have been painting the sky and earth red with their glow, right to the horizon. The days have been growing shorter. The sky is a vault of clouds: darkish, but still warm. We just had warm rain falling in big, thick drops. Now it's stopped, and it's muggy and close, the smell of evaporating water in the air.

I'm leaving for Brudnice. I have to find it, the source of all this, learn the truth. Get to the place where this nightmare was born. That's where it all started. I have to see that glade I saw in my dream again. Does it really exist, in our world? Is there a cabin there with the game inside? The marsh? The *thing* which lives there? Is it all there?





# Book Three

*The Hermitage*

## Solo Psychodrama.....9th October, 1999

I'm in Brudnice. Alone. Impenetrable forest surrounds the village. And the *thing* is here. So close.

I'm playing. You won't believe it, but I'm playing *De Profundis* on my own, playing the third book. No, I'm not going to tell you what this part of the madness is about. Because you're my friend. I won't tell you, and I won't tell anyone else. Forget it. Don't look for things you don't know, which you'd be better off never knowing.

I've totally passed over into the world of imagination, now. I roll one die, and read everything from tables I create myself while playing. I've filled many thick notebooks with writing. When someone finds these tables one day and starts to read them or play with them, they'll go mad. There's no way out now. It's too late. I've gone too far, there's no going back. I draw tables, I write, throw the dice, play. I've got to get to the end – that's the only path left to me.

The wind has spread grey wisps of cloud across the sky. Strange, but it's very warm, although it doesn't matter much to me either way. Mist in the evenings. And in the mornings, too. The sun hangs just above the horizon all day long.

I've made myself a character sheet. I've been filling it in slowly, by playing. Now I know what will happen to me when I finally finish filling in all its intricate blanks.

I've been poring over the map I've made for *De Profundis* Book Three. Naturally the first thing I put on it was my grandmother's house, where I'm staying now. Next, I placed some other houses, this street and the whole village, then the various roads and paths leading into the woods. I've divide it all into circles, squares, fields, areas. Then I roll the dice. This is the map I'm playing my final game on. The tables and dice let me explore the lands of my imagination. I'm discovering secrets of my mind I'd never dreamed of. I never even suspected...

Yesterday, I generated a demon, and he moved into the attic. Through a run of bad luck I gave him hooves, and now I have to listen to him stomping loudly every night.

Right! Tonight I'm going to confirm the results of an experiment. I'm making the tables and lists for it now. They need to be larger and more complex now than the journey generator. Of course, that can get bigger again when I come back to it.

There's no game master here, watching my hand, but I don't cheat. I've no dice up my sleeve. I roll one die, honestly, and check the result. This game is too close to reality. Cheating here would mean slowly losing my sanity. I'd advance more slowly too, losing experience. I can't afford that.

And so I'm in Brudnice, alone. Drawing tables, making rules. It's beyond describing, but it works, and transports me to another world, maybe the one hidden within this one.

I roll the die...

I'm standing in front of an old, lonely, deserted house at the edge of the village. Trees surround it everywhere. Something has been chasing me; but I'll find shelter in this house. I run, but weariness is taking its toll. I must have spent a long time roaming the woods. The door is closed, but fortunately I get it open, eventually.

I'm inside...

Ah! I've dropped my die, and it's gone under the table. OK, here it is... I look around me. Dust, cobwebs. No one has been here for ages; must be years. Right: upstairs I'll find a desk...

(...)

I've been waiting a few hours now. It's raining outside, and almost night. Something is prowling round the house. I'll double-check the shutters...

The Hermitage is the greatest madness; here the random generators spawn things without limit.

You can only see clouds next to the sun. Watery, narrow, light-filled streaks. The rest of the sky is completely empty. The sun is just a lighter spot against the watery stains. Sometimes it shines out over the earth, and shafts of light cut holes in the vastness of the forest.



## The Mechanics of Questions.....11th November, 1999

I've received your letter! You've no idea how happy that makes me! You're all right – I'm so glad. So relieved.

For some time now I've been wondering how thought actually operates. Any thought. Exactly! That's a question and a half, isn't it! It's the mystery of the rules and the generator – of questions, and our brains. Questions like tests: the deepest explorations of the soul and the unconscious. Psychodrama.

Instead of tests – questions. How am I today? Am I in good shape? Would noises like that scare me? Am I carrying any weapons? Would I ever use them? Could I? With answers to these questions, the scenario flows on its own, smoothly. It's psychodrama. We have to know ourselves what has happened and how.

I work with the map, roll the dice, browse the tables. When I encounter tracks, obstacles or monsters, I perform a test by asking myself questions, or I roll dice. Is there a way out from here?

I've decided I won't even send you a draft of the last book of *De Profundis*. *The thing* is too insistent I do. But this time I won't give in. The Hermitage is going to stay in Brudnice.

I'm asking myself if this is the end... Is this the way it all finishes, all this work? Will there be an empty house here when I'm gone, like with the Hermit in the marshes? Will anyone come to Brudnice and find my game? It really did crawl out of the Abyss.

It's snowing lightly, the first snow. There was a light frost this morning, but now the road is all mud, and there's wet slush everywhere. Ice floating on the water.

I'm glad you're all right.

Say hello to everyone for me.

## The Final Letter.....22nd November, 1999

The snow has melted. It's dry again, all that's left are a few whitish patches. It's raining, but sort of... carelessly? The sky's dark, celadon and blue, but just above the horizon there's a lighter streak. The multi-coloured clouds are like skyscrapers in the sky: huge roofs, white, yellow, cream, pink, orange, grey, sky blue and purple. Dusk comes quickly, around four p.m. At night, the moon keeps hiding behind phosphorescent clouds. I don't need to play the Hermitage any more. Or summon the Phantasmagoria.

I'm going to the forest.

As soon as I'm back, I'll write to you. I'll explain what's been going on the past two weeks. In two months it's *Saturnalia*; that's how it all started a year ago.

It knows now I'm not going to finish *De Profundis*. Unless, of course, it's too late...

The end is coming. I want to look it in the eye. Meet it face to face, if it has one. And either I'll manage to stop it, or...

I need to find that clearing in the marshes. So I'm leaving for the forest. But it's more than a forest; it's a labyrinth, a cosmic maze of invisible gates and paths, leading to innumerable worlds and dimensions. It's the nexus where all the forests of all the worlds come together. Will I meet tiny elves, centaur-like horse-people, the children of Shub Niggurath? Will I encounter great forest cities and walking trees? Will I come back?

It's three a.m. I can hear the cackle of the goat-suckers – or is it the laughter of some other inhabitants of the forest? The village lies dead and quiet. Only the wind is awake.

Four a.m. I've packed the most useful stuff. I'm waiting. When will the night end? When will the faintest light appear, to give me a little hope? On my way, I'm going to put this letter in a neighbour's mailbox. I hope he'll give it to the postman. Ah well – it's not that important. I'll write to you with all the details when I'm back anyway.

Dawn. The horizon turns pale quickly in the east. In the west, darkness still reigns, violet, cyan, blue. A red and orange glow around the shimmering sun. Mists floating above the meadows.

I am leaving.



# On Conventions

*De Profundis* is a game inspired by the works of H. P. Lovecraft. For this reason, even though the core concept of role-playing by means of letter-writing can be used in a wide range of genres, the game rules so far haven't touched on playing more generic 'letter-based RPGs' which don't feature Lovecraftian madmen struggling with the unknown.

The possibilities for role-playing by letter-writing are practically limitless, defined only by the nature and character of the Society writing them rather than by any specific rules in *De Profundis* itself. The game's style as written is tied closely to mystery, madness and despair, taking the Cthulhu mythos as its background, but none of those elements are mandatory.

## The Convention doesn't change

Although you can happily deviate from most of the rules you establish when you create your Society, the actual *convention* you chose to play in should remain the same for the whole game. It's a choice which defines what you really want to play, what type of game you prefer, and what you'll allow ourselves to write.

A given convention has two interlocking elements: theme and style. The first is essential: you need to choose a theme in order to know what you're playing.

The second raises your game to a more advanced and at the same time more restricted level. As such, it's generally for those looking for an alternative means of correspondence who are willing to add additional rules to their chosen theme. For example, some players like to write their letters in a style which fully fits their game world. Others, on the other hand, find the letter's form to be of secondary importance, and don't mind language anachronisms and compromises in accuracy as long as they don't ruin the general mood of the game.





## Tables

An optional element of *De Profundis* (but one which I encourage everyone to use) is *tables*. It's an interesting part of playing *De Profundis* – filling your character's notebook with tables, expanding on them, taking randomly-selected words and transforming them into events or any other element of the game.

A table is a set of keywords connected by theme and convention. When a player uses a table, he commits to implementing one of those keywords in his next letter or in the plot in general. How great a role this keyword plays is entirely up to the player.

The nature of your game Society and most of all the style of the convention you're using are the two most important considerations when creating tables. With regard to the convention, a table can also express the goals of an 'adversary' (see the description of adversaries in the sample conventions).

Of course, it's also a good idea to include some additional plots besides typical convention elements – maybe even using tables to resolve them. And if you're completely out of ideas, you can take a dictionary or encyclopaedia and randomly pick a word and use it in your letter, and even as the letter's theme.

Tables can also create your story's plot (within the bounds of the convention, naturally). Common tables can be included on the Society Sheet before the game begins. Doing so means that certain events can be assumed, but when and how they happen is up to the player writing the letter.

If you're put off by the randomness of rolling on tables, then simply use them for inspiration, choosing words from the list which interest and inspire you. Using tables has its limits, too, of course: for example, if someone rolls a 'suicide' for the second letter, when the plot has hardly had chance to get started yet, you need to interpret that with a light touch – maybe as an illness or simply depression. Tables should be flexible tools, as flexible as your mind assigning a meaning to a keyword, whether literal, metaphorical or contextual.

Apart from elements directly connected to the convention you're using, it's also worth introducing additional content into your story – randomly picking words from a dictionary is highly recommended for this.

Some sample tables are given following the suggested conventions below.

## Combining Conventions

All conventions can be mixed, merged and freely modified. The important thing is that the description of the implied plot should be obvious. Don't be too contrived here, either: the more clear and understandable your convention is (or the combined conventions), the more freely the players can move around within it, and the easier it is for them to compose their letters.

For example: *Cthulhu Mythos In The First World War* is clear enough for everyone to understand, but *Psychological Grotesque With X-Files Elements*, although it initially looks interesting, might actually be quite difficult for everyone to agree on an exact meaning for. A convention should be a challenge for the players, but it should also support their play.

## The Convention and the Player Characters

The player characters and the style of their Society should of course fit the chosen convention. For example, after establishing a 'historical war period' convention, you need to agree details: whether it's World War I, the French Revolution, the Crimean War, or some fictitious war in a fantasy world; as well as how it affects the Society. It can be either the background to your plot (a character just happens to be living in a region occupied by invading forces), or it can directly affect the players' actions. In the latter case, the player characters could even be officers or regular soldiers exchanging letters about what's happening in different parts of the front line.





## Sample Conventions

### Cthulhu and Weird Fiction.....

The classic thriller, in which you can use the whole range of *De Profundis* concepts in full. As H. P. Lovecraft has been the main focus of *De Profundis* so far, I'd also like to touch upon the possibility of drawing inspiration from the works of Edgar Allan Poe as well.

Lovecraft's writing technique is to deliberately blur the reality investigated by one of his characters with something 'inexpressible' – a blurring which leads to the character losing his mind. Following this Lovecraftian technique, our characters gradually drown in a longed-for madness not as a result of having touched upon some disturbing aspect of reality *per se*, but rather upon the *suggestion* of such – reduced to being 'unnamed', 'inconceivable', or at best 'blasphemous'. It's not the lack of literalism, which is a dead end in stories of this nature and should be avoided at all costs, but rather a lack of detail, so evident in Lovecraft's prose.

In this respect, Edgar Allan Poe is Lovecraft's exact opposite: he's the unmatched master of detail, and we can draw inspiration from him by the handful. *The Man Of The Crowd*, *The Premature Burial* or *William Wilson*, to name a few, are all examples of how to use and fully exploit a certain aspect of reality, or a mental illness, and then distil from it all the expected elements of the horror genre. For those playing in this convention, reading Poe is as helpful as reading Lovecraft.

But these two writers hardly exhaust the breadth of weird and eerie tales, nor are their techniques for handling the weirdness and eeriness of the genre definitive.

#### Random Weird Fiction Keywords

1	Mysterious visit	7	Toothache
2	Death of an animal	8	Broken engagement
3	Torn out page	9	New plant species
4	Broken clock	10	Strange frost shape on the windowpane
5	Black cat	11	Lover
6	Broken mirror	12	Strange illness

## The X-Files.....

This convention refers to *The X-Files* TV show, and the *Conspiracy Theory* movie. Of course, the players don't have to be employed by some kind of agency: they can simply be ordinary people, who know a lot and want to know more, or (quite the opposite) who'd rather forget some things.

The Cthulhu mythos, or even the 'common extraterrestrials' motifs, which can easily be introduced into this convention (but which aren't essential), are based not on 'the weird' (at least not mainly) but rather on conspiracy theories, which form the whole external framework of the game's theme. Indispensable elements of this convention include paranoia, alienation, distrust, and the uncertainty of the truth. It's also worth mentioning that this convention usually involves faster-paced action and a greater threat from the outside world than the *Cthulhu and Weird Fiction* convention.

In this convention the adversaries – 'They' – are *real*, although unknown: the Society isn't alone in some mysterious story, investigating without worrying that someone might interfere. Here, uncovering secrets triggers more and more urgent attempts to silence the players by some unknown, powerful adversary. In this convention, traditional mail can be replaced by email, although you can also send CDs, copies of top secret files, dictaphone tapes, pictures, and so on.

Also, all appearances to the contrary, you can actually shift the time period of a game like this and place it into different historical periods. In such cases you can use members of twisted sects, Freemasons, spies, and so on. As well as the aforementioned TV show, you can also get inspiration from various crime fiction novels or those derived from them (such as Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*).

### Random X-Files Keywords

1	A friend's suicide (They always make it look like a suicide)	7	Poison
2	Missing informer	8	Withdrawn newspaper edition
3	Loss of a job	9	Betrayal
4	Slander	10	Shots from nowhere
5	Being followed	11	Threats
6	Car accident	12	Fire, Kidnapping, etc



## History.....

You don't necessarily have to play in the present day or inter-war periods, even though the 1920s has an undeniable charm. Whilst many people do like to play in those periods, not only because it's core to the Cthulhu canon but also because of the jazz music, women's fashions, and other aspects of the Twenties, picking another period is also worth considering.

The Victorian era, the American Civil War, the World Wars, even the Great Depression are all interesting periods. In *De Profundis*, it's also easier to play someone other than a common hoodlum: scholars, writers, politicians and professors are all a bit more serious and interesting to play than some gun-toting cowboy or gangster. Nor is there anything stopping us from going even further and playing in the Italian Renaissance or Ancient Rome.

Structuring your Society around a specific historical event is also a particularly tempting idea. That lets you play out the whole Russian Revolution or the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, for instance: from societies and associations before the event, to its outbreak and its path of conflict, to following the fate of its participants and those swept up by it. There are plenty of interesting 'campaigns' to be played in a historical *De Profundis*: the background to Hitler's failed assassination at the Wolf's Lair, or accounts of the Crusades, to name but a few.

Games like this demand preparation: reading books on cultural history, the biography of a person living in the period in question, maybe even familiarising yourself with the period's painting, music and political situation. It's ideal for groups fascinated with a certain period of history.

In this convention, you can concentrate on a specific country or social group, and create tables for the corresponding Society as necessary.

## Other Worlds.....

When you consider that fictional love letters by mythological heroines were already a feature of Ovid's *Heroides*, this convention has a long tradition. It may be easier to draw on Christian mythology – the New Testament is full of letters from members of what was then the Christian sect (Christians – *De Profundis* is simply encouraging exploration of this theme) – using the mythological language and biblical events in a historical convention. You can also use this convention to transfer the game into a realm known from fantasy books or other mythologies.

Tolkien's Middle-earth, the worlds of the Strugatski brothers, C.S. Lewis' Narnia are all as good a theme for a game as our own world. And although the continuing popularity of related prose online and in fantasy magazines means you could easily come across Societies like "The Minas Tirith Scholars", "The Zone Investigation Commission" or even "Unfortunate Lovers Of The Winter Queen", this convention also seems to attract 'traditional' role players. Systems which feel ideal for letter-based games include *Victoriana*, *Ars Magica* and *Vampire: The Requiem*.

You can also use *De Profundis* as a live complement to a regular role-playing game. In this case, the letters written probably won't have the clear goal which Societies tend to have. Their function is more to add colour and indicate psychological traits, i.e. filling out a long campaign with detail (more on that in the chapter about using *De Profundis* in a traditional role-playing game – see page 84).

Moreover, players from multiple groups and GMs running the game for different groups can participate in this convention. Players from different groups can exchange letters and experiences. You could establish a Society called "Lazy Students from the University of Nuln", and there'd be some player who'd include a short episode at this university on their character sheets in order to write letters to other players.

## Family.....

In this convention, all Society members are from a single family (or are closely-related) trying, maybe after years of silence and no contact, to prevent some terrible event threatening them all. Maybe it's a curse passed from generation to generation, an approaching financial crisis, preventing the loss of an important family possession, a mysterious inheritance, stopping a divorce or aiding a specific family member who could be kidnapped or fatally ill.

The main components in this convention include terrifying family secrets from the past, the outside world's ostracisation (in the form of hostile neighbours, police, reporters, etc.) and – most of all – dealing with the difficult personalities of the other family members, who have to be found, convinced, and their whims satisfied.

In this convention, unlike *The X-Files*, the adversary isn't real and doesn't react to the characters' actions. Instead it's something more elusive, but still frightening – the passage of time. There could be an inescapable time limit (instead of setting a specific date, you could agree on a certain number of letters, for example), or at least agreed rules on the pacing of the action, but either way it's best not to interfere with the correspondence mechanics too much. It's enough if the players advance the plot by writing about the illness getting worse, the time limit for the curse approaching, the appearance of the first symptoms of the illness and so on.



You should come up with a timeline of family events from before the start of the game, maybe even an outline family tree and other information known to all the family members, as well as the appropriate player references. In this way you can avoid situations where one player remembers “those crazy times in the casino” just when another has stressed his hatred of gambling, despite having a family of debauched, poker-obsessed characters. It’s usually best if the players work out these family characteristics together first, each player adding details until there’s a clear picture of the family, and then characters can be created. However, it’s also possible for just one player – say, the Society’s creator – to present a ready-made description of the family and the problem it’s facing, and then to invite the other players to join in.

Random Family Keywords			
1	Alcoholism	7	Disinheritance
2	Mother’s portrait	8	Prison
3	Mental illness	9	Suicide
4	Patricide	10	Family Photo
5	Incest	11	Twins
6	Bankrupt	12	Servants

## Crime and Punishment.....

The leitmotif here isn’t the Cthulhu Mythos, mysterious tales, or conspiracy theories, although all of these can act as background: the decisive role in this convention belongs to the characters’ passions and desires – especially the unhealthy ones.

By ‘passion’, we don’t mean writing at length about how much you’re besotted with some damsel, or flooding your correspondent with some romantic gibberish about ‘the one’. Love doesn’t even have to be an explicit theme in this convention. Sure, the players may play the admirers of a particular woman, but equally they could be conspirators craving power, tyrants satisfying their whims, or fanatical followers of an ideology.

In other words, letters in this convention are about participating in a crime – or about covering one up. The Society can be, for instance, a group of revolutionaries or conspirators; or you could go further, and play people involved in some sort of bloody intrigue, wanting to step back, and now plotting their own conspiracies, quietly from within.

Passions are the mainstay of this convention. Swap the cold logic of sinister plans for personal aspirations, murder, love, and betrayal: let these elements influence events and develop as personal issues for the characters involved.

In this convention, the players probably have many individual adversaries, but in this case you don't have to worry about assigning them roles (as you would in *The X-Files*, for example): the adversary in the *Crime and Punishment* convention is *fate*. Players should bear this in mind when creating events and advancing the plot: there's always some witness to bribe or assassinate, pangs of remorse, nightmares, the deepening guilt-triggered madness, as the whole series of cruel events, instead of dying out, escalates, encompassing more and more innocent people.

*Macbeth*, and all of Shakespeare in general, is great for inspiration here. You could also mine Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* for ideas, or Zelazny's *Amber* novels for fantasy fans.

#### Random Crime and Punishment Keywords

1	Betrayal	6	Insomnia
2	Arrest	7	Hallucinations
3	Blackmail	8	Ghost of the deceased
4	Innocent victim	9	Bad omen
5	Incorruptible witness		

## Psychology.....

Playing in this convention might seem difficult at first, but it's actually not that demanding. Also, developing a detailed plot isn't necessary, so people who can't play regularly might want to give this one a go.

The convention entails focussing letters written on the portrayal of the characters themselves, their friends, and the personality changes they undergo as time passes. You can define the frequency of letters – so one letter per year, for example (game time, of course – in real life it can be as often as we want, so the game doesn't have to last that long) – presenting changes that have occurred in the characters' lives as a result of participating in strange events, marriages, bankruptcies – we can draw on any convention, and simply water down its details, which are subordinated to the 'psychological' theme in this case.



Also, in this convention there is no real point including lists of events occurring over a long period of time and leading up to the current state of play – letters written like this would soon become an incomprehensible mess of out-of-date issues. If we do describe a given event, it's purely as a pretext for describing personality changes, destroyed illusions, successes and failures, an upcoming fall, and so on.

In games like this, letters tend to be longer and more exhaustive, and so you can attempt to compose them with more precision and greater attention to detail. Chekhov is a wonderful inspiration for those wanting to play in this convention, especially his *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, but you can read some of his novels, too. And for the connoisseurs – Proust's *In Search Of Lost Time*.

## Jewellery Box.....

In the Jewellery Box convention, play is across several levels, at least one of which is a documentary text or diary entry. It's about the Society searching for or studying parts of some manuscript, uncovering some past story or, for example, looking for members of a failed expedition, interviewing them, sharing information. The plot is interwoven with events from the real world (i.e. the Society's realm) and the world of the investigated documents, which in turn can refer to other worlds and events, ad infinitum.

Playing in the 1920s, solving a puzzle from an 11th-century manuscript, referring to it in a letter or preparing copies for other Society members, it's vital to remember to manage the suspense across all the levels the plot takes place on. You may want to check out the structure of *The Fall Of The House Of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe, Huberath's *Nest Of The Worlds*, and any stories in which elements from 'Jewellery Box worlds' spill out, or even become reality.

## Grotesque.....

A few core *De Profundis* themes touch on the grotesque, so it's worth looking at more closely. You may for example want to distort a few or all of the personality traits or behaviour patterns of your characters before your game starts, in order to increase the impact of the unfolding story, sharpening its contours, maybe even introducing some minor comical elements bordering on farce.

The process is interesting for the way we explore the literary style in itself, in addition to maintaining a regular and sensible exchange of letters. Witkacy's novels and plays are very serious despite being made up of elements not entirely serious; nothing stops us from using this method in our correspondence. It doesn't need to be strictly related to the world depicted, but rather to the writing style itself. For fun, you could use naturalism, or even treat yourself to Wildean or baroque kitsch.

In choosing to 'liven up' your letters like this, you're not losing anything: quite the opposite, you can have just as much fun, and with more laughs, too. Using tables to randomise events in the first place is a kind of Dadaism, so why not go the whole hog?





# Societies

## The Society Sheet

The exchange of letters in *De Profundis*, especially in the early stages of the game, can easily fall foul of differences in what each player is expecting from it. In a traditional, 'talking' RPG, you can quickly and easily work out a compromise which suits all the players without even stopping play, but doing so is extremely difficult when you're playing with letters. But, without such a compromise, the exchange of letters usually peters out very quickly.

As a result, it's worth setting the 'framework' of the Society when you first create it, before the game starts. It's extremely useful, both for friends, who can avoid such misunderstandings by deciding how to pitch the game before it starts, and also for strangers, who are the people you usually play with in *De Profundis*. The *Society Sheet* helps you clarify this framework.

A Society Sheet can include player expectations, rules and style of correspondence, the graduation of suspense, how fast the plot will develop, and maybe other individual, player-dependent factors.

This method may seem a bit patronising or limiting, but it's only actually needed at the outset of the game. The whole setup can gradually be phased out when the plot picks up, when following and developing it is the players' responsibility.

In short, you don't have to restrict yourself to such a tight set of initial rules once the plot is safely established. And that's exactly what the Society Sheet is – a base, a starting point for your exchange of letters.

## Society Goal

Most Societies are formed with a specific goal in mind – to solve a mystery, to deal with a problem, to exchange information and views, or for mutual protection and aid. Defining that goal is one of the most important things to highlight on the Society Sheet.

However, you also need to specify the time and place of the action, as well as describe the plot in a few words (so, investigating a professor's murder, or a family motif like a curse or inheritance – where the players would be members of a dysfunctional family uncovering an imminent threat). This is all tied up with your choice of convention, so it's worth considering the two things simultaneously.

Of course, Societies may also be created for lesser reasons. They may simply bring together scientists or, say, bored rich men or inveterate gamblers. Players are free to choose, and may prefer the 'game mood' and the pleasure of writing letters over actually reaching a goal or solving a problem or mystery.

Usually, though, a clearly-defined goal is an excellent spur to the game, and is one of the most powerful and intriguing elements motivating the players to write.

### *Sample Society goals using the Cthulhu Mythos convention:*

- Helping a friend
- Deciphering a mysterious book
- The secrets of an old homestead
- Investigating local murders or disappearances
- Uncovering an ancestor's secrets
- Following an inspiring explorer

## Society Members

Characters are the foundation of *De Profundis*, which makes establishing a clear framework for them to operate in a very important task. The weaker the plot groundwork, the more important this framework is – after all, it's the characters that have to develop its motifs in their letters.

The choice of characters is directly linked to the nature of the Society. Here, some other special rules may be applied, maybe fixing the characters' minimum age, their origin, past events they've experienced, and the consequences of which they now have to face.



They may relate to a certain person, known to all characters in various periods of their lives, who they now create by recalling the acquaintance in their letters. The special rules should also establish the level of acquaintance of the characters themselves, too, whether they know one another, what their relations are, and so on.

## Detailed Arrangements

Apart from the elements mentioned above, which are somewhat self-evident, there should also be a few other, additional details on the Society Sheet.

For example, next to the Society's goal and the characteristics of its members, you could mention the agreed convention (*The X-Files*, Psychology, etc) and the players' expectations: some players may want to cut straight to the chase, while others may prefer a more leisurely plot development.

We recommend establishing an initial permitted level of Cthulhu Mythos (and maybe even a permitted level for the entire game), and possibly basing the game on that. You can also establish additional rules and requirements (pacing of action, etc.). Generally speaking, as soon as the game reaches a point where the plot becomes clear, you can carry on without needing to follow these rules, but for the same reason it's better to introduce more detailed rules at the start of play.

The Society Sheet is also a place to write about the expected literary level of the game, or the characters' age ranges, and whether traditional written letters are required or printouts are allowed (despite the game being placed in, for example, the 17th century).

## Knowledge Available to All Members

Additionally, the Society Sheet should contain character descriptions for Society members, provided they're acquainted right from the start. Also include all other information that isn't 'meta' (known to just the players) but known to all the characters. Part of this will already have been defined when choosing the Society's goal.

For example, you could provide all members of the Society with a folder containing all available data on the investigation, and use this as a point of entry into a detective game. Based on that folder, the players share opinions on how to deal with the issue, and together solve the various puzzles and then the whole case – or not.

## Updating the Society Sheet

It's good for players to make notes about their own characters and the other players on their society sheet. This makes tracking relationships easier, and enables new motifs to be developed and introduced.

It's also a good idea to create a calendar, so as to avoid mixing events up. Receiving a letter should be followed by a summary of how this letter affects the plot: this way, it's not necessary to read it all over again to recall its contents. This is indispensable in a prolonged exchange of letters – without it, it's easy to blur the plot, forget important motifs, or simply overlook important information.

If the players are using tables, any tables concerning all the Society members should also be included on the Society Sheet (individual tables can be noted in your own notebook).

## Society Sheets

The following sample Society Sheets highlight the following features: convention, time and place, plot, society, additional rules, tables.

### Court Martial.....

#### **Convention:**

Weird Fiction / Jewellery Box

#### **Time and place:**

Eastern Europe 1915 and 1917-1918.

#### **Plot:**

Investigation of a small but mysterious episode from the Battle of Dukla Pass in 1915. A handful of low-ranking officers from the Austro-Hungarian army are to be charged with treason and sentenced to death. However, investigation of the documents, letters exchanged, and copies of orders suggests that the case is not as straightforward as it first appears, and the accused are likely to be innocent. The players follow various leads in order to solve the mystery (for instance, this could involve a mass murder of a civilian population by the soldiers, laying down arms in the face of the enemy in spite of clear orders from above, and so on).



They get to investigate military documents (orders, reports, letters), visit old battlefields, talk to prisoners, look for witnesses, and withstand the pressure from above to find the accused guilty. And the war goes on...

### **Society:**

The players play high-ranking officers, and also may play cooperating reporters, doctors, and anyone else who could be involved in the investigation.

### **Additional rules:**

Cthulhu level: players should establish the permitted limits of 'weirdness' or 'eeriness' in the plot, which may be different for the different time periods.

### **Tables:**

Investigation Complications (d8)			
1	Conflicting testimony	5	Illness
2	Non-existent village	6	Assassination attempt
3	Missing series of letters	7	Threats
4	Missing order	8	Love

Clues from Orders and Letters (d6)			
1	Weather	4	Madness of the locals
2	Missing mountain path	5	General's order
3	Coal mine	6	Brook or stream



## The Pact with the Devil.....

### **Convention:**

Family

### **Time and place:**

Any early 19th century European country. The plot takes place over a few years and ends with the pact's deadline in June 1822.

### **Goal:**

The aim of the Society is to lift the burdensome curse.

### **Plot:**

The Society is a small group of people, who met the Devil at a costume ball during the Vienna Congress a few years ago. As then-failing aristocrats, bewitched by his charm and drunk on alcohol, they were tricked into signing a deadly pact. The demon has made all their wishes come true, bestowing wealth, talents, women. However, on the seventh anniversary of the pact, he will collect their souls. After a few years (up to the players how many exactly), the mysterious scars each of them bears on their shoulders are becoming more distinct, and clearly prove that what they'd like to regard as a dream actually happened. They renew contact with one another in a desperate bid to lift the devil's curse.

### **Society:**

Best 2-5 people, aged 25-35. It's recommended the characters live far from one another and haven't been in touch for years. Their first, and last, shared memories come from those Viennese balls. They may have exchanged a few letters afterwards, laughing at their delirious ravings and the alleged meeting with the Devil. Each of them should be rich, have a happy family, be recognised locally, and have some social obligations. Maybe they had another acquaintance, who died recently, together with his whole family, because he had told someone about the pact (this may be an additional condition – never to tell anyone about it, or the Devil sends death to the family the very same night) – this proved the trigger event which made the Society members act.

### **Additional rules:**

Each letter should advance the plot at least a few weeks (the distance and time taken by the activities described should be taken into account). Depending on personal preference, and if there's a wish to speed up the action, the time remaining can be shortened (for example, they've only 18 months left to the deadline). Cthulhu level: moderate (searching through mysterious books dealing with witchcraft, etc.).



**Tables:**

Effects (d6)			
1	Burning scar	4	Vomiting, food loses taste
2	Light repulsion	5	Insomnia
3	Aural hallucinations	6	Bugs

Environment (d10)			
1	Children's trip	6	Priest
2	Wife's family	7	Servant
3	Count's visit	8	Alcoholism
4	Costume ball	9	Wake
5	Old men	10	Wedding

Various (d8)			
1	Additional memories about signing the Pact	5-6	Conflict with a Count
2-3	Visions	7	Lover
4	Calendar with proverbs	8	Letter from the Devil

Environment (d10)			
1	Children's trip	6	Priest
2	Wife's family	7	Servant
3	Count's visit	8	Alcoholism
4	Costume ball	9	Wake
5	Old men	10	Wedding

Demon-repelling Book (d4)			
1	Torn out pages	3	Mrs Twardowska's portrait
2	Strange spell	4	Blood ritual

## Cultists.....

### **Convention:**

Crime and Punishment

### **Time and place:**

Europe 1920

### **Goal:**

The Society is to put a stop to a science circle's interest in the occult

### **Plot:**

The players belong to a small occult group, which a few years ago accidentally discovered and angered a Cthulhu deity (in a 'light' version – they were just witnesses to it). In order to mitigate its anger and prevent a disaster, they had to make a bloody sacrifice (and maybe have to do the same, say, every three years). Ever since then, they've lost touch with one another. However, a scientific circle (maybe the Investigators from a regular *Call of Cthulhu* session) finds a copy of a book once used by occultists to release the Great Old Ones. The player characters learn about this, and have to dissuade the scientists – possibly their former friends – from having anything to do with the book. Its old seals are very fragile, and it won't take much for everything to take a tragic turn, and persuading the curious, knowledge-hungry Investigators is very difficult. Is it even possible?

Will the Investigators turn down the possibility of new knowledge? Maybe the ultimate sanction should be considered – for the greater good of humankind. Moreover, there's an investigation into the missing victims from the ritual years ago, and the police are close to discovering the culprits.

### **Society:**

Typical characters from Lovecraft's novels, each scarred by the past. Each should have their own, private secrets related to the ritual murder – motifs they explore during the game. The players need to establish a common history related to the active period of the occult group; an exact story of the crime is also important.

### **Additional rules:**

This convention is usually good for players who like to cut straight to the chase, but the Cthulhu level can be kept low. No special annotations.



**Tables:**

Investigation Progress (d6)			
1	Another witness	4	Sentence
2	Arrested for a few days	5	Depression
3	Tiring testimony	6	Press interest

Additional Plot Events (d12)	
1	Discovery of another copy of the manuscript (roll the country)
2	Creation of another group of investigators interested in obtaining it
3	Discovering another Cthulhu cult in a similar situation
4	Investigation into the cultists goes forward
5	The need for another sacrifice
6	Contact with the deity
7-12	Nothing happens

## The Coquette's Lovers.....

**Convention:**

Weird Fiction / Grotesque

**Time and place:**

Late 19th century Europe. The plot can continue until the 'panacea for love' is found or bankruptcy declared. There are no time limits. This convention is best played as 'psychology'.

**Goal:**

The players construct a character independent of themselves and explore aspects of her life that they alone (allegedly) were told. It's difficult to say which way the plot will go, but initially the Society members compete against each other for a woman's love, and maybe later want to take revenge on her.

**Plot:**

Through idle gossip, the players learn that they're lovers of the same woman (they won't want to believe this, of course, and their lover will deny everything if asked). The correspondence begins, in which the players declare the rights they have on her heart, maybe striving for a duel, or the opposite – they want to take revenge on her, while at the same time failing to rid themselves of the obsessive love that's ruining their health and wealth.

### **Society:**

The players play aging, well-mannered gents or young romantics, but with one thing in common – possessing the chosen one's heart is their greatest happiness. They only know each other from the vicious gossip whispered behind their backs. The characters are pretty wealthy, with official titles and a certain social or artistic status. They should live in different provinces of the same country, visited by the lover, who allegedly travels from one place to another 'visiting family'.

### **Additional rules:**

Their insane love for the coquette drives the characters to the edge of insanity as quickly as she brings them to financial ruin. Like everyone ever in love, the characters imitate the object of their love – players should include her habits, sayings, whims, give up on their own acquaintances to 'fit' her intelligence level, etc. Translated into game rules, this means a table dealing with changes in the characters' personalities, based on recently-received letters describing the coquette. Of course, it's also about ambition, as every character wants to outdo the other with ever greater proofs of their love and ever more extravagant gifts. In other words, a player who just sent a letter describing his lover's recent visit and his memories of a meeting, shows the others the way to further degradation (mutual exchange of ready-made tables can be arranged), as each in turn has to outdo his correspondent with his proofs of devotion. You can of course use other tables. It's good to have a portrait of the coquette before the game (such as Botticelli's *Primavera*, for example), and to establish her intelligence and some basic personality traits. Cthulhu level: zero.

### **Tables:**

The Coquette's Whims (d8)	
1	The coquette dreams about a villa on a secluded island
2	The coquette dreams about spending a million in a casino
3	The coquette wants an apartment house in Venice
4	The coquette dreams about a sea voyage to India
5	The coquette dreams about a yacht voyage to Egypt
6	The coquette dreams about a personal collection of Rembrandt's sketches
7	The coquette has a whim to rent a castle in the Swiss Alps and spend the winter there
8	The coquette has fallen in love with the opera and plans to meet a few Italian tenors



**Finances (d6)**

1	A friend, bankrupt, is calling (maybe he's the coquette's lover, too)
2	Loss of profit
3	Theft
4	Property takeover
5	Savings
6	Debtors

**Love Hurts (d10)**

1	Piece of clothing
2	Letter
3	Jealousy (a friend is the coquette's lover)
4	Change of heart
5	Hysteria
6	Migraine
7	Suicidal thoughts
8	Awoken artistry
9	Gossip
10	Ineffective medicine

**Sayings and Habits (d6)**

1	Doesn't have breakfast, allegedly for the good of her skin
2	Doesn't meet artists any more, apparently too sentimental
3	Dresses in season-fitting colours
4	'It's so beautiful!' – says this about everything, even an apartment someone bought
5	'Life is a tragedy'
6	'Our love is infinite'



mit  
Verloff  
Dum  
...  
... durch ...  
... Amen ...  
...  
M. ...



# Synopsis of a typical 1920 *De Profundis* campaign

## Step One

A *De Profundis* reader has decided to form a Society, wanting to play the Weird Fiction convention. With no definite plan in mind, he decides to play a British aristocrat, Sir Edward Sedgwick, who out of chronic boredom collects rare books and manuscripts.

Before the First World War, to avoid the tedium, Sir Edward did some travelling around Europe. Here and there he made acquaintances he now wants to renew. Players may enter the game as people who met him back then. This Society initially attracts two people: one is an antique seller from Budapest, a Hungarian Jew named Josef Kovacs; the other is a commercial architect and botany layman, known to be a garden design specialist. His name is Louis Gauret, and he lives in Paris. Neither knows the other's address at the start of the game.

## Step Two

Having had an idea for a plot, Sir Edward sends two letters to his old acquaintances, telling them about a Dutch botanist's manuscript which has gone missing from his collection.

*I suspect my former servant, a very strange man, whom I employed during the war. I quickly realized he could not be trusted until eventually, a year ago, I dismissed him. The Dutch manuscript disappeared roughly around that time. Out of desperation, I even began searching for that servant to see whether he had indeed stolen it, but it's impossible to track down a person in London these days. He was a curious type, with a somewhat deformed face. Anyway, I can't imagine so simple a man to have any use for that manuscript other than as an object of trade.*

— he writes to both of his addressees.

In the subsequent part of the letter, he asks each of them for advice on a different matter, each according to their capabilities. Louis Gauret reads that before the war the blasé aristocrat kept himself busy by growing various species of tulip, to avoid going mad from boredom. He even managed to cultivate a strange variety of tulip, one with a jagged calyx.

With the Dutch text missing, he's not sure whether the calyx isn't some symptom of a floral disease, and asks Mr. Gauret's advice regarding further plant culture, experiments, and books he could possibly use.

On the other hand, in a letter to Josef Kovacs, Sir Edward describes in more detail the missing 17th century manuscript, mentions its author, and asks about the possibility of finding another copy, and other works by the same botanist. He also expresses hope that the manuscript has been sold and is now circulating among collectors, which could be easily verified by Josef, who has many connections.

*Price is no object, dear Josef.*

## Avenues of Inquiry

The plot has been divided into two threads; neither player knows about the other, and each can freely develop their own threads in their replies.

It's important to open up new avenues for our correspondent to follow in our reply, even if we decide our character knows nothing about the subject at hand. Remember that the letter is the only place where the action happens, and if we fail to introduce a new element or provide an avenue in our reply, we're letting the story drift into a dead-end. A lack of active response like that is both annoying and discouraging.

Tables are useful here, in that they provide entries (words/events/motifs) which can be used to refer to the sender's letter.

### *Step Three*

Not knowing exactly how to deal with the 'tulip problem', Louis Gauret gives a few pieces of advice on cultivation, but mostly expresses his amazement at the results of the Englishman's work.

*A jagged calyx may mean we're not even dealing with a tulip any more. If I had more information, I'd give you some definite advice. Strangely enough, in Holland there used to be a superstition about certain calyx shapes in tulips. During the tulip fever, some growers' possessions and harvests were stolen; some of the growers themselves even went missing. The manuscript author you mention, dear Edward, is said to have departed this life under mysterious circumstances.*



*It's an odd coincidence, and of course these are only superstitions and old stories. I learned this from my wife, who has returned from Holland at last. She was searching for some reference material for my works on watering gardens, and has learned some interesting stories.*

Later in his letter Louis focuses on the servant, deciding to make him more significant than Edward's letter had implied. He writes that his wife had mentioned an obnoxious, sulky man, who spent a lot of time searching through the Royal Library. He stopped coming after a theft was reported. Maybe it's the same person? Louis pledges to find out more about these events, especially as he has to go to the Hague himself soon anyway.

#### **Step Four**

The player playing Josef Kovacs doesn't know why the manuscript is so important to Edward, so focuses on describing (inventing) its author and his other works, their history, completely marginalising the botany thread. He refers to the Dutchman's two other treatises, "On Silence and Focus" and "On Solitary Life", as the only ones with copies in circulation. He also writes a great deal about the Dutchman himself, describing him to Edward in detail, establishing certain facts from his life (contradicting those cited by Edward). Awkwardly, he also picks up on the thieving servant thread, and writes that recently his son had spoken to a bookseller friend from Berlin, who told him about a very unpleasant, weird Scotsman with a mark on his face, asking about copies of the Dutchman's works.

*It was a few months ago. I've just sent letters to my friends in different towns, asking them whether they met this man, and if so, what he wanted and what his name was. I will let you know if anyone replies. Anyway, Laszlo said this man had a lot of cash at his disposal. From the description in your letter, it appears this is the same person. I'd bet he's the one that stole all the Dutchman's manuscripts. It's how it works in this business. I wanted my son to tell me more, but a lot has changed here since the war. My business has collapsed; all I have left are my contacts. I do some strictly private work now, for a few collectors, and work hard in a bank to earn some extra money.*

*I've grown estranged from Laszlo, stupid whelp, as he's fallen in love with an older, rich widow, and left home some six months ago. I don't approve of this relationship, although it brings him quite the penny.*

*The youngster doesn't know yet that money isn't everything. He lives in a posh part of the town, one I rarely visit. I know he plays the violin in coffee houses and wants to do some business in Berlin together with his lover (she's some German strumpet). I'm left on my own. Sometimes he visits, though, so I may be able to get some more information from him.*

### **Step Five**

Sir Edward now has a few threads to choose from, and a few to straighten out to prevent the plot derailing by being built on contradictory facts. He resolves the issue of the book-stealing servant being in the Hague and Berlin at the same time by Edward regarding it as a family affair, whose members collect certain books for an unknown reason. He announces in his letters that he's on his former servant's trail at last: his London acquaintances informed him about a certain Scottish family, which has been collecting various books, mainly on growing rare flower varieties. In botanical circles this was easy to learn, but for Edward to connect his former servant to it wasn't obvious. An aristocrat planning to humiliate a Scottish family and accuse them of stealing a manuscript makes this a strange and interesting plot thread. However, to make sure the whole theft issue is true, he might be travelling to Scotland soon, as he has no solid proof yet.

In his subsequent letters, Sedgwick asks his correspondents to gather information on the Scottish family (this request is directed to Josef, as he may have information on various collectors), and also on cultivating unusual varieties of tulips, and Dutch legends related to them (Louis).

At the same time, with Louis he develops the thread about the "ailing" tulip beds and his declining garden. He writes to Josef informing him that a French acquaintance, who's also looking for books on gardens and botany for his studies, will contact him soon. He also writes to Louis, introducing him to Josef and giving him Josef's address for correspondence.

All the players have now been introduced to one another. Even if they have nothing to write about to each other, it's good at least to exchange introductory letters. Indeed, right now the correspondence between Louis and Josef ends after two letters, but that's nothing to worry about at this stage of the game. When one of the characters becomes a key character, it's only natural that the correspondence between the rest wanes.



### Step Six

On the technical side of things, we're looking at a clear indication sent by one player to the others, telling them to prepare a background that he'll then explore himself (the announced trip to Scotland). Their subsequent letters to Sedgwick contain various revelations, confirmed and unconfirmed rumours relating to the Scottish family, any rare books they may have recently acquired, and the thefts they may have committed.

Josef also presents some random facts about the collectors, and the known family members. Louis intercepts the Scotland thread and invents connections between the missing botanists from Holland and a few other countries, and the Scottish family, connections which even stretch over a few hundreds years. He makes up amazing legends relating to exotic varieties of flower, but leaves all of them undeveloped for Edward to choose from, if he decides to pick up this thread.

## Domino and Primer

Despite appearances, this is an essential element of the game, so let's have a closer look. In actual fact, constructing a story 'domino-style' is a standard feature of *De Profundis* correspondence: the first player sends a motif activating the second player, who intercepts it, develops it and sends it back to the first one, who in turn receives it in its new form to advance it further by adding to it again.

This way of writing *can* result in gradually increasing chaos. However, controlling that is not the players' goal. They should focus on this method's merits, using them to their advantage and playing with its characteristic features: pacing, plot twists, adding and entangling threads, introducing new characters, changes in their own personality and outlook, and so on, freely using it and adding variations.

The game may go a different way, though. Here, chains of letters form a sort of 'primer' containing outlines of the main picture which will be filled in later, usually in a few (or sometimes just one) letters. This kind of situation may result from the chosen plot (for example, running a detailed investigation), or may appear completely at random, as a side thread, and very often a strictly "scientific" one. In our example, it mostly derives from the aforementioned Sedgwick's garden and Louis' advice regarding it.

The game, a typical “domino” structure, has sneakily begun developing this additional botany thread. In exchanges of letters concerning various investigations, knowledge sharing, assumptions, quotes from books, quoted legends and scientific examples, you can easily develop multiple levels of the problem in question. The advantage of this correspondence method is the power of choice, which always remains with the player running the thread. If, in the case of the ‘domino’ structure, we’re dealing with the reciprocal treatment of introduced facts, then in the ‘primer’ a table of contents is created which one of the players can use. By assuming the role of researcher and asking others for advice, we’ll often use such outlines in various ways, finally picking the best elements to suit our taste.

Edward busily notes all Louis’ revelations regarding his garden, and the French botanist will soon receive a special letter concerning the results of their joint effort. We won’t go into detail here though, as it’s a side thread.

### ***Step Seven***

A series of three short letters from Edward follows. These are notes from the Scotland trip, where he uses and develops threads previously suggested by his correspondents. The player decides not to finish the game yet, although it would be a good time for him to send something stylish, like a Lovecraftian farewell letter. Instead, he decides to shift the game balance towards the other characters, who so far have only been providing him with advice (although of course Louis’ investigation in the Hague opened a few avenues, and, similarly, Josef could have asked one person too many questions and could get himself into trouble, if he should feel like it).

It goes like this: after the travel letters, Edward sends details of his return to Warwick, about stopping his investigation, and also about the demise of his garden (in one of his private letters to Gauret, crowning the game with a ‘primer’). Everything is written in such a way as to clearly suggest that something happened in Scotland that Edward is not yet telling. Moreover, to add a bit of insanity to his character, he decides to use a different writing style. Not gibberish, or the use of ellipsis, nothing that graphic he simply decides to diametrically change Edward’s interests and his way of thinking. From now on, his letters are full of long, visionary paragraphs on death, convincing others to embrace it, descriptions of his dreams, and so on. In short, his letters become ‘weird’. And finally – to shift the plot weight to the other players – he tells them to beware, for ‘they’ know everything, as he’s told them everything, including their addresses. *Death is coming from Scotland*. This way the correspondence between Louis and Josef is reborn.



### **Step Eight**

To finish with, how long should Edward keep quiet about Scotland? It's only purpose is to not reveal everything at once, to present the other players with the free choice of which problems they'll now face, but the other players' ignorance shouldn't be prolonged.

There's nothing more annoying than an unrevealed mystery. It's different if it just concerns a detail, which can be hidden for a long time and be the subject of much speculation, but you can't postpone something as fundamental as the game plot. We advise caution here.

That's why, after apologising for bringing evil on them, Edward writes a long letter describing what happened on one of the Scottish islands, and what evil threatens the other characters now. This could be a second convenient moment to end the game with this character, but since the campaign is quite successful, Sir Edward doesn't commit suicide just yet, and decides to serve as a counsellor now.

*I don't fear death anymore; I know I can't escape it. I've already given instructions to bury me under the cedar tree growing on my property, like in the Constable painting, but you still have a chance for a reprieve. True, it's only a reprieve, but maybe I'll be able to help you somehow...*

The roles have been reversed; the game goes on.

### **Step Nine**

Meanwhile, another interesting character joins the game. Sir Edward decides to introduce Radoslaw Wagrzynski to the Society. He's the owner of an exclusive funeral parlour in Krakow. Desperate, certain of his imminent death, the British aristocrat decides to order a coffin made of good Polish wood – for himself and his friends. With his order and his greetings, he sends Mr. Radoslaw both Louis' and Josef's addresses. Soon both of them receive letters from Krakow sent by a Polish funeral company asking for their measurements, requested wood type and instructions concerning coffin finishing...

# ***De Profundis* and Traditional RPGs**

## **Correspondence between Game Masters**

The network of Societies can run parallel to a traditional roleplaying game as an element of the game. Consider maybe organising several GMs running different groups in the same universe in a traditional RPG to make the results of one group's actions affect the other groups. In this kind of situation, the correspondence serves the purpose of reporting events between sessions.

Also, nothing stops such GMs from acting as *De Profundis* 'regular contractors' for their groups, mutually describing and inventing events for their 'subordinates' to take part in. Events from one group trigger tasks for another, creating an adventure-generating engine serving all the groups involved. An additional advantage for the players is extras in the form of letters, which can be used as props during sessions.

Implementing this idea isn't too complicated, and only takes two GMs running the same system.

## **Correspondence between Players**

Of course, players from groups like these can correspond between themselves, too. There's a campaign begging to be run where two groups would play through two different threads (distant in space or different in nature) related to a common issue. The letters here would enable the groups to stay in touch and exchange details of their progress; the GMs' jobs would be to coordinate the flow of letters containing the session events.

You can approach this differently: maybe you set it up so that the groups exchanging letters aren't only not cooperating with each other, but are actually openly hostile to one another. They have opposing goals, but accomplishing these goals rules out a direct confrontation (which would require running one session for both groups live). A mediaeval campaign springs to mind, where one group would consist of an emperor's followers, and the other, followers of the pope.



Each group would set their own goals during a session, while corresponding with the opponents; and the GM's task would be to coordinate events and letters, and implement the results of the opposing side's actions.

The above-mentioned situations require the GMs, as coordinators, to be present. Without GMs, the players could still run a free correspondence, acting more as an adventure storytelling than a game itself. This could be a lot of fun, especially for players who like to show off their characters outside sessions.

### ***De Profundis* as an RPG play aid**

*De Profundis* tends to be used within a group as an auxiliary tool for creating narrative continuity between sessions. The game master and players agree to use letters to manage post-session activities like equipment shopping, planning, and character aspirations, rather than use precious session time. At the same time, they decide to give up on 'meta' speech, and arrange everything through their characters (the player characters being the authors of letters to non-player characters).

Letters like these can include comments regarding in-session events, telling the game master how the players experienced them, and what they consider most memorable. It also shows him which threads are worth following in subsequent sessions as most intriguing for the players. He can also anticipate threads to come which the players are already prepared for.



## DE PROFUNDIS ONLINE



From: nobody@nowhere.com  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: De Profundis by email  
Date: 20 January 2009 23:58

Hello!

---

I was thinking to myself recently: you know, the thought keeps haunting me to come back to playing that weird game. Remember? The one about writing letters, walking through streets looking at everything from a different perspective, then turning on your imagination and writing it all down.

We stopped playing cos the post was dismal and delivery took too long, and sending a paper letters these days is a chore for us couch potatoes, let's admit it. The book discouraged using the net and email – too bad. With all the requirements to write things down on paper, it all fell apart, though it was a great experience while it lasted.

So I've been thinking, doing a bit of wheeling and dealing, exchanging ideas with a few friends who know a smattering of *De Profundis* from the old days, and had similar experiences. In my opinion, the game was begging to be expanded, to have a sort of final chapter written, opening the door to a 'new era', where paper correspondence has become obsolete. So we've gathered our thoughts and found that with some modifications we could do this on the net.

We're almost there, although no one knows if it'll work or how much it'll feel like the snailmail version.

If you want, I can put you down and you can start experimenting and fine-tuning it all with us. Or, we can do it without you, and our unfinished game – or a brand new one, who knows – can wait until we've got some conclusions and experience.

OK, that's it for now. Let me know if you're in or staying out, ha ha... :-)

---

Best,  
Nobody





From: nobody@nowhere.com

To: deus@nowhere.com

Subject: **Two uses for the net**

Date: 23 January 2009 0:13

.....  
Hello!

Hi! Right, to start with, let me explain. I was supposed to introduce you into the game like you wanted, but in the meantime (sorry for deciding for you) I decided it'd be better for the game we're still trying to finish (both for the rewriting, the corrections, changes, and the game itself) if you hung on a bit longer. At the same time, you'd be able to have a look at everything we've done from a fresh perspective, with a clear head. Believe me – it's more a brainstorm than a climactic game, so you're not losing out on anything. I'll try and give you detailed updates.

So what did we decide? For starters, after loads of arguing we've come to a compromise – or, to be precise, we've realised both sides of the argument were right. We were talking about whether we should shift the whole game into the 21st century, the Internet Age, you know, emails, apps, forums, blogs, hidden underground zones, whatever, or do just the opposite and pretend there's no Internet transmitting our correspondence, and continue playing in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Then we had a brainwave – we can do both.

So, following the main book, which divided everything into categories and types, we named those two epochs the Internet Age and the Paper Age. We'll deal with all this in detail soon, but already it's clear that our unfinished game is set in the Paper Age.

I've got to sign off now. I hope I can describe all our ideas about the Paper Age in my next mail, since we're starting with it. And if you want, we could start with our previous game, too.

Take care!

\_\_\_\_\_  
Best,  
Nobody



From: nobody@nowhere.com  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: Paper Age  
Date: 28 January 2009 14:22

Hello!

Firstly, ha ha ©, I'm not sending those notes by snailmail, so get used to that. In our *De Profundis* group traditional post isn't the way to go right now, even if the game itself takes place in the Paper Age! I'll send it through of course once I've scanned it – by email, now that we've decided it's no longer a sin. You can print it out and we're done. Your printer's OK, so the hard-copy should have an authentic feel to it and the right atmosphere.

OK, so, in brief, here's what we've decided about the Paper Age.

In the Paper Age, the net is only used for practical reasons. We write an ordinary, proper letter – handwritten, maybe decorated with drafts, sketches, press clippings if needed, stuff like that – all the obvious stuff for *De Profundis* – then we scan it and send it all by email.

Then, after you get the email, you don't read it on screen (you know how "comfortable" that is, let alone the atmosphere...), but instead print it out and only then start the usual, classic *De Profundis* reading – together with all the moody setting like the right time of day, the right conditions, peace and quiet, etc.

Here, playing in the Paper Age shouldn't be swamped by the rush which is typical these days: it should meet all the requirements for a classic *De Profundis* game. We need to make the effort to make it feel like a normal paper correspondence, bar the improved delivery time and reliability.

True, it's not vital, since many people (some players from our own group included) would happily make do with a linguistically-correct letter in a text file in Times New Roman. Some people find this completely transparent, and it in no way affects their sense of immersion. Even so, it's still good to decide on the form before the game starts.

By the way, some people will have to be reminded about that curse of our times – bad grammar and stuff. I'm not talking about you, of course, but if you play with someone who suffers from reading only grammatically-challenged posts, play in the Internet Age from the start, where that kind of style is common and permitted (it's still not pretty, but at least it can be excused as 'stylistically correct'), or state clearly that he should at least use a spell-checker.



Coming back to printing out hand-written letters and stylised attachments – one idea (a great one, too) was to buy some yellowed, cream-coloured paper and print letters out on that. Not a big problem, the cost is low, and the results are much better.

So, as you can see – no big changes. But, thanks to the net, the main problem (which killed our previous game) has disappeared. I'm talking about the snail's pace of posted letters, the inconvenience of posting them, letters getting lost...

That's all for now...

---

Best,  
Nobody



From: nobody@nowhere.com  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: Internet Age  
Date: 13 February 2009 20:41

---

Hello!

It's been a while – but in the meantime we played a major part of a story in the Paper Age and started a campaign in the Internet Age. And I tell you - in the Internet Age "Online *De Profundis*" really gets to show its teeth!

You see, in the Internet Age, once this new media for playing a campaign becomes an integral part of the game, and not just the place where our letters travel, it turns out that the net itself starts weaving its own plot threads. The news services are full of events which are perfect for our game. Of course, not everything that looks familiar or suspicious has necessarily to be related to our story (you have to be careful not to exaggerate, and resist the temptation to use absolutely every event out there which feels like a conspiracy theory or Mythos event), but one thing's for sure – there's a huge amount of choice out there. The net itself throws up motifs, explanations, clues, and interpretations.

Another thing: playing in the Internet Age you need to be consistent, use the net to the max. You can't pretend to be cut off from the information or people you need, because if you're online then you have plenty of information available, even if it's not always reliable. There are online encyclopaedias, specialised news services and forums, online museums with scanned books, historical documents, newspapers, etc.

Similarly, things change when it comes to documents we have that are used in the story. It's easy – a simple scan or digital picture attached to an email, or a link to an online reference, and you're done.

It's a simple trade-off: something's lost, something's gained. Everything is closer to the everyday life that some *De Profundis* players are happily trying to escape from for the duration of the game. The mood of the game changes, but we gain vast new possibilities. That's why Internet Age emails should be packed with pdfs, images, links, quotes, etc – it's a sin not to take advantage of all this... And here's where the real fun begins, as the letter itself, which takes you a few minutes to read, becomes a gateway to what's sometimes a few hours of reading (if you want) the suggested or attached material. On top of that, considering that everything on the net usually sends you further and further, ad infinitum, soon you're reading things your correspondent unintentionally pointed at, but never got as far as himself. So, you attach those, or just your related conclusions, to your reply, or send it to another person involved in the same game.

What's created in an Internet Age game has less to do with a Lovecraftian atmosphere and more to do with conspiracy theories straight from *The X-Files*. Investigating the Mythos can be replaced by sniffing around the shady doings of not always honest - but often influential – people, sometimes brushing up against criminal circles and shady undergrounds unknown to Joe Public. All dipped in the present day, in our here and now, everything that's being trumpeted by the media every day. On the edge of security, on the edge of shadow – this real, nightmarish shadow, that exists in our world. In the old days, horns and hooves were the signs of the devil, or tentacles in Lovecraft. Now – it's probably a suit, a tie, and a dishonest, sly, mask-like face. Old pledges and Lovecraftian rituals replaced by dirty business and horrific crimes. New, modern media means new, modern horror – if the players want it.

The rest comes tomorrow, cos I have to go now. Ciao!

---

Best,  
Nobody





From: nobody@nowhere.com  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: Characters in the Internet Age  
Date: 14 February 2009 17:53

Hello!

---

Right – let me finish what I started yesterday, as I didn't write about one interesting thing about Internet Age characters.

At first, we played random characters, but it didn't work out. It quickly started looking weird, like when a random lorry driver or insurance agent starts to obsessively investigate some suspicious-looking affair (OK, the latter might fit, he could be following his company's instructions to investigate whatever happened here or there, but you get me). For who actually gives a damn or does anything about scandals and weird events these days?

So there you are. Nutcases and paranoids aside, only those who make a living out of it, those whose job it is. So we quickly finished the first Internet Age campaign and created proper characters, professional sleuths, who fit this type of game more logically. A police officer from an investigation department, a reporter looking for scandal, a scientist doing specific research. OK, so we've also got the proverbial paranoid conspiracy theorist, but he brings something valuable – he knows literally loads about all these weird beliefs, urban legends, stuff like that.

By the way – there are several reporters. We have three freelancers working for various newspapers, magazines and tabloids, each of them looking for that magical case which will send them right up the career ladder.

And let's be honest – proper, Internet Age archetypes are few and far between, and it's better if they're duplicated than to have someone shoehorning in a character who isn't remotely suitable. It's hardly believable to have one of our pro news-hounds writing to some random person with no useful knowledge, authority, etc.

The list of archetypes also shows us how these characters fit into the story, which is the axis of the game, what their research and correspondence looks like, and, more importantly, how they come into the game in the first place. A believable initiation is better than some far-fetched trigger that you have to turn a blind eye to, even if it was supposed to be a standard "Hi, my name is so-and-so, I'm looking for some information on this and that, so I'm writing to you..." and so on, but in a more developed and subtle form.

Both a reporter and a detective may search through piles of news snippets, newspapers, trying to find clues in seemingly innocent news, associating facts and interpreting them based on their own unique experiences and knowledge.

It's completely in keeping for the protagonist to personally go to one of the places above to investigate, observe what happens there, search the location through, see it with own eyes, or talk to someone mentioned in a publicly-available article (described of course with full press misdirection – aliases, false initials, etc). Or to reach the author of such a piece to get some answers. In a DeP correspondence, this gives you a kind of mission or investigation report, or an official account, provided the players make sure their mutual information exchange and trust makes sense.

So, you can start thinking about a character to fit the above criteria, too. Would you be a cop sniffing around a case run by his department, or a ubiquitous and inquisitive reporter, or maybe someone completely different who fits the criteria? Think about it, let me know, and we'll sort out the rest – what country we're playing in etc.

Best,  
Nobody



From: nobody@nowhere.com  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: Mood, style and plot  
Date: 16 February 2009 14:22

Hello!

We had a quick brainstorm, and though we didn't have too many constructive conclusions, we did clarify one problem we hadn't previously anticipated, one that can easily kill a game. Although we advise making maximum use of the copious online material suitable for your campaign, you need to be careful not to put too much effort into the whole process of looking up stuff in the first place, material which is often contaminated with everyday life and ordinariness buttered with the kind of trashy commentary which is really offputting to a reader. You need to be careful about shifting the balance of the game to the process of collating material, and not let it dominate the subject and spoil the story. Don't let it obscure the atmosphere of your plot with a layer of online cynicism, stupidity and pointless posts by bored kids. The ratio between links to online material and written content in the letter should be set and maintained – the more cluttered the material we send, the more we need to take care that the clutter doesn't outstrip the story and the mood of the game.



It's sometimes better to pick, copy and paste a fragment in your letter than send a link to the relevant site, which also contains lines of arguments from internet trolls and trashy posters.

On the other hand, a genuine exchange of letters has always been *De Profundis*' primary framework. It's important to remember not to impose a classic DeP stylisation on your letters, but rather replace that with language appropriate to today's email style, with one reservation: that it doesn't look like some young kid's emails who spends his days in front of the monitor out of sheer boredom. Remember the chosen and preferred Internet Age professions and archetypes – it alters the form of the letter, even if it's only a short, rushed email. Regardless of the accepted modern form, your posts shouldn't go below a certain level of familiarity.

---

Best,  
Nobody



From: nobody@nowhere.com  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: **Playing on forums**  
Date: 20 February 2009 18:05

---

Hello!

I've been wondering about the thing you mentioned – moving the game, or part of the story, onto a forum, to make it more or less public. It's very tempting. But I don't want to go down that route – I value my universe too much to make it accessible to just anybody.

The Internet makes even dreamers and outsiders change, trim their souls to fit these fast times. Their magic works by creating moods during conversations, or writing letters – it's a kind of hypnosis, a very direct skill. On the net that's mostly useless, you can't hypnotise a large number of random, anonymous strangers. They're not readers bent over books, or listeners sitting in silence, but an interacting, communicating group – there's no personal reception there. There's a group reception, and this of course works like capitalism in a free market – the opinions of the quiet become dominated by the opinions of the loud.

A cynic always has an advantage over someone who you've touched emotionally, cos ridicule is always more effective than admiration. Dreamers become suckers, fools become leaders – these are the charms of the net – and they're not proper conditions for the delicate, fleeting atmosphere of a *De Profundis* story.

That's why IMHO it's better not to move the game to a forum. Unless you intend to run the game in a similar spirit – very modern, cynical, littered and tainted with everyday life.

---

Best,  
Nobody



From: nobody@nowhere.com  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: Quick game  
Date: 23 February 2009 23:18

---

Hello!

We're playing Internet Age a lot, and it turns out there are some more factors which change from classic *De Profundis*. For one thing, the plots suggested in Book One no longer make full use of the internet's advantages.

The speed of email exchange means letters can arrive on a daily basis, even several per day, if necessary, and if the correspondents have enough time. As a result, all those arduous scientific research ideals for a classic DeP game, those weeks spent in laboratories or libraries, simply hamper and obstruct the game now.

That's why this new, fast *De Profundis* needs new, faster plots, which don't need to stretch over weeks and months. The pace has to accelerate, and plot twists can't depend on prolonged investigations. Letters need to describe specific short, one or several day-long stages, even if it means shorter mails as opposed to extensive accounts from research taking months.

So, we need to change some of our *De Profundis* habits...

---

Best,  
Nobody





From: nobody@nowhere.com  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: **Base address**  
Date: 27 February 2009 12:01

.....  
Hello!

\_\_\_\_\_

We're going a bit more public now, and setting up a small website. It'll mainly be a base address for everyone who wants to join in and try playing. Interestingly enough, moving all this address exchange stuff onto the net will make it much easier to add new people or remove invalid applications, and – most importantly – it'll be free of all that personal data protection stuff, because all you need to give is a nickname and an email address.

We're also planning to make a few websites with fictional reports in the future – you know, a pseudo news service to use in the game. If we don't want to dig around in the dump of the everyday real-world media, we can always opt for this service, maintained in conspiracy theory style and run by paranoid investigators of facts. Woe unto those uninitiated who stumble upon this service, ha ha! ☺

So, send your character and some info on how you might get hold of his email address. You know, whether it was on his magazine's website, or a contact on his university website, or anything else. It'll make it easier for your correspondent to construct the first sentence, the "Hello, I found your address in..." bit.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Best,  
Nobody



From: nobody@nowhere.com  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: **Hmm...**  
Date: 28 March 2009 23:47

.....  
Hello!

\_\_\_\_\_

I'm playing, I'm playing, no worries... I'm a bit behind cos I started corresponding with a few people who we didn't know before, and everything kicked off too quickly and way too much. It's taken up all my attention and free time, so sorry for those quick'n'dirty replies. I hope everything went forward on your side and you've lots to do on DeP.

I've got to tell you though, a few weeks ago stuff started happening. I think I've finally found a mystery, and I'm not sure if it's what it seems to be, or maybe I'm just imagining things and adding in all these hidden layers. Maybe it's like this – if you're looking for something hard enough, you eventually find it. And I've finally stumbled upon something really nasty and abnormal. You know, no tentacles, nothing like that, simply pure horror from a human point of view, the ultimate evil, because it's very human, tangible, where there's money and low motives, sick whims and the needs of twisted minds in play. It smells less like mythos, more like prison bars and the criminal underground that I hoped I'd never have anything to do with. But maybe I'm just imagining it all, after all we did assume we'd filter chosen news, blogs, world events (both foreign and domestic) from our own town, our own yard, where all you need to do is go outside to see with your own eyes how much truth there is in someone's writing. And also our assumption that these things we select then go through the horror filter, and you know what horror movies are like these days – *Saw*, *Hostel*, etc... So maybe I've been a bit influenced and embellished it myself. So I'm thinking to myself and worrying whether to dig deeper. I'm just safely surfing the net from home and all. But the net is like Nietzsche's abyss sometimes – be careful when staring into the abyss, it may stare back at you. I don't know if this thing stinks for real – whether I'm leaving traces leading back to my house while searching through these sites, looking for certain key words. I hope not, and most of all I hope this story – which I sometimes think I just discovered during the game – is nothing more than a chain of coincidences, and I haven't found anything, or anyone who might get me in trouble.

Well, just be careful where you look and who you investigate. See you...

Best,  
Nobody



From: MAILER-DAEMON@tur.nowhere.com (Mail System nowhere.com)  
To: deus@nowhere.com  
Subject: Message returned to sender  
Date: 13 May 2009 01:09

.....  
This is mail service nowhere.com  
The message attached below has been returned to sender

For more info email <postmaster>  
Make sure to include the content of this email, otherwise we won't be able to help you.

Mail server nowhere.com

<nobody@nowhere.com>: not found



# Appendices

## Appendix A: Finding Games

If you're looking for players outside your own group, the best way to find them might be to search online. Since its first edition, *De Profundis* has received online support for Society contacts.

Here are some URLs you might find useful in finding a game, though there may well be others out there. These are offered with no guarantees and merely as a suggestion for some starting places.

***<http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/de-profundis/>***

This Yahoo Group serves as a database for players to share their characters and contact details for both pen & paper play and email play. It also offers articles and advice about playing as well as links to useful resources.

***<http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/deprofundisonline/>***

Unlike the above group, this Yahoo Group serves as a contact point for modern day characters to get involved in email exchanges for those who wish to play in this medium.

***<http://www.yog-sothoth.com/>***

This is a hugely useful site for any Lovecraft or *Call of Cthulhu* fan, and *De Profundis* comes up in discussion on their forums from time to time. This might be a good place, as a player, to find others interested in forming a Society or to find useful resources and valuable links.

***<http://www.cubicle7.clicdev.com/>***

It would, of course, be remiss of us not to mention Cubicle 7's own forums, which you can also visit to find interested players as well as discussions about other products.

## Appendix B: Character & Organisation Archetypes

Lovecraft's stories are almost always about the outsiders, dreamers, and renegades of the human race, those who are unwilling to subject themselves to mundane laws, and who don't participate in the rat race for mundane reasons. Lovecraft's characters can see more, are able to see things whose existence in our world others don't even suspect. They direct their gaze beyond the most distant of earth's horizons, to the infinite cosmos, crossing even the farthest limits of time and space. Often they're no longer able to live like normal people. They are different – just like gamers. When reading Lovecraft, many role-players feel a strange kind of unnamed affinity with his characters. There are also those who, when reading a HPL story, identify very closely with one particular character. Perhaps they think they've been able to understand that character better, more deeply than most readers, that the character is closer to them? Randolph Carter travelling the Abyss of infernal realms to find the happy dreams of his childhood, the brilliant, sensitive artist Pickman turning slowly into a corpse-eating ghoul, the primitive but sensitive mother of Wilbur Whateley, a monster pretending to be a man – these characters mean little for most people. But maybe you're different? Maybe some longing, incomprehensible to the average person, hidden down deep from the sight of those around you, tortures your soul?

If a player decides to officially run one of these famous characters, they might modify a few facts:

- They might change some dates. For example, if the character appears in a story at a time that doesn't exactly fit the game.
- They might skip the death of the character, or some accident that befell them.

We need to be careful and considerate when introducing changes into the life stories of characters taken from Lovecraft's stories. The only justification for making such changes is to make playing this character possible in *De Profundis*.



## Appendix C: In the World of Psychodrama

### *A Read-and-Play Article*

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There are many types of game in the world, and some of them form a rather special family. The head of this family is role-playing games; other members include board games, war games, story games, card games and their like, live-action role-playing, dramas and psychodramas. Each has its own language and its own special thing to offer, each is connected with a different area of life and culture; books, computers, mail, travel, sport, theatre, etc. It would be unfair to present the above types of games in a hierarchy, from the most primitive to the most sophisticated, although one could, of course, present a schematic of their evolution, a family tree of some kind. I should stress that a game that has evolved from traditional role-playing games isn't necessarily better or a Game for More Experienced Players. I know gamemasters who can get more emotion, atmosphere and drama out of a *roll*-play than many others can out of storytelling. Lots of role-playing sessions become imprinted on players' memories better than some dramas.

### Psychodrama.....

During Polcon '97, three of my friends, Dafal 'Alienas' Kaczmarczyk, Robert 'Ganelon' Stawiarz and Miroslav Meyer presented various types of game, including psychodrama. There was an argument regarding the word; did it mean the kind of fun described by Paul Anderson in his novel *Psychodrama*, or some form of psychotherapy? The name does indeed refer to two different kinds of game, hence the misunderstanding. Here, I'll describe psychodrama as a game played for fun, without going into the second meaning, into psychodrama as a therapeutic session run by a specialist in order to bring about certain pre-determined results. So let's begin.

### The Session.....

What do you have to prepare for a psychodrama session? Nothing. You need no world description, no character sheets, rules or scenarios. Now you know why there aren't any handbooks for this weird stuff on the market. Even so, in the sections which follow I'm going to suggest a few useful items, which should help make the game more colourful.

So what's it all about? Let's see...

A few people have got together. Two, three or ten; it doesn't matter. They're gamers, fans of role-playing. They don't have any handbooks or dice with them; they don't even have an idea for an adventure. They've made themselves comfortable in a darkened room, closed their eyes, quietened down, and now... they begin to play.

*Player 1:* I don't have anything with me, just a handkerchief and my flat keys...

*Player 2:* And I've got a headache. I couldn't run a hundred metres today...

*Player 3:* It's dark in here, isn't it?

*Player 4:* It is. Can you hear that clatter?

*Player 2:* I thought I was imagining it.

*Player 3:* Where are we?

*Player 1:* What do you mean, where? On a bus. We're going to my place for a role-playing session. Why, is anything wrong?

*Player 3:* Of course there's something wrong! Where is everybody? We're all alone on this bus.

*Player 1:* Shit... I was sure a moment ago there was a woman back there, two old men and a guy in a suit.

*Player 4:* Look! Under that seat! A cigarette still burning –

*Player 2:* I don't like this... Look out of the window –

*Player 3:* What? What do you mean?

*Player 1:* The sun's setting... At eleven a.m. –

*Player 3:* Holy shit!

*Player 4:* Quick, the driver!

*Player 1:* Okay! <knocking> What's wrong with him? Asleep, or what?



**Player 4:** No... He's dead...

**Player 2:** Hey! We're slowing down! I think the bus is going to stop –

**Player 3:** And now we're in a ditch... The back door is open! Come on!

(...)

**Player 1:** God! Where are we?

*...and so on*

Now do you know what it's about? There's NO GAMEMASTER here. Only players, and at the same time, each has a bit of the game master in them as they create another piece of the story. The players interrupt each other, add things, intercept each other's words, develop them, analyse them, deny them, experience them, visualise them... So...

## Visions.....

To really experience a spontaneously unfolding, un-predetermined adventure, your game should fulfil several conditions.

First, play in a darkened room, preferably totally dark, and with your eyes closed, too. It's very important, even necessary. It'll be easier to actually see the scenes of the game, to come close to the edge of dream, to glimpse the surroundings and events on the inside of your eyelids. Try lying on your back.

Second, our characters in psychodrama are ourselves; in the state we're actually in at the moment of playing, equipped with the same objects we really have with us.

Third, psychodrama works better for horror. Horror is full of emotions related to our inner world, and can draw players into the story most quickly. The story almost builds itself out of traditional elements and classic motifs like, for example, mysterious sounds, uncertainty, puzzlement, bewilderment... And, of course, horror works perfectly with the darkness required by the technique...

## Other Features of Psychodrama.....

### **Storytelling**

Reading the excerpt above, you'll have noticed that all narration is in the form of dialogue. No one says, 'We're walking down a forest road, passing old gnarled trees, a farm fence falling apart, the moon is shining up above...' etc. Rather, it sounds like one of the participants has a Dictaphone in their pocket, recording only sound.

Nevertheless, it's still possible to be clever and build descriptions or action into the dialogue. For example: *'Won't this road ever end? Aren't these trees gnarled, and weirdly too. They must be really old. Look! That looks like a fence... I think? Is it a farm, or what? And isn't the moon bright tonight...?'* And so on.

This kind of description is more tiring than a traditional RPG. Plus it involves all the players continuously, forcing their imaginations to work all the time, constantly creating, processing, experiencing. Sometimes it's like walking a tightrope, not to mention the difficulty of introducing any dynamic action in this way, or encountering a game world equivalent of an NPC.

### **Time**

For these reasons, psychodrama doesn't last as long as an average role-playing session – probably about an hour. Is that short? Maybe, but the sessions are so engrossing that they tend to leave us satisfied – even relieved that it's over.

### **Emptiness**

I've just mentioned the difficulty of playing through encounters with NPCs. So, the worlds of psychodrama usually aren't populated. For some reason, all the people vanish, or the players are transported into some empty landscape to wander through it alone. Alternatively, the people are there, in the streets and in their homes, but for some reason they are apathetic, passive, somnambulant or possessed, which makes conversations with them impossible. As a rule, this absence of living, active people also becomes the core of the plot, or an important element of it.

### **Vivid Scenery**

Perhaps because of this loneliness and inability to interact with others, the players' creativity is carried over into the scenery. They paint extremely vivid, amazing images. Often symbolic scenes appear, giving us food for thought, long after the game has ended. By creating the landscape, the players descend into the depths of their minds.



### ***Insecurity and Confusion***

The emotions accompanying the game are also entailed by the mechanics. None of the players is the game master. None of them has the final say; none of them can create the world and events of the game on their own. Nobody can know what will come out of their own words or ideas, whether they'll be developed further or regarded as hallucinatory nonsense and ignored by others. You introduce an idea, and it's modified and transformed by the other players. In this way, the adventure is co-created. Here, the ideas, imaginations and psyches of all the players compete, resulting in something none of them has invented or predicted. In this game, the players play a story that hasn't been written by a game master. The story creates itself, spontaneously, as the minds of the players collide.

### ***More on Dynamics***

I've already mentioned the difficulties in creating fast, dynamic action. Yes, it's difficult, but not impossible. I've participated in sessions where the speed got faster and faster all by itself, for example during a panicked flight to the top of a forested hill, after opening graves from which undead reached out to grab at our shoes. However, in such cases, the action does grow faster by itself, and it happens when emotions rise. I don't think a player can speed it up consciously the way a game master might. They won't be able to intensify people's emotions by speeding up the action; rather, the intensifying emotion will speed the action up.

### ***Music***

Music plays a vital role in a psychodrama session. We can play in silence, with no background sound at all, or to ambient or 'visionary' music, which is either decorated with various non-instrumental sounds or made up of them completely. Often they're thematic albums, bringing to mind, for instance, huge mechanisms, cities, gurgling forest marshes, mediaeval castles, etc.; peculiar collages, acoustic images and stories. There are literally hundreds of groups recording such albums. (In the near future, I'll try to write a little about this kind of music and include a few addresses where you can order them.) For now, let's take, say, the soundtrack for *Dracula*, *Interview with the Vampire* or some computer game. Generally speaking, it should be some dark ambient music, preferably full of extra sounds (wind, chains, screams, rustling, cracking, whispers, howls...) that will create some audio background for the session. It'll be something like a game master, leading us through changes of atmosphere, suggesting ideas, impressions and associations to us, and especially stimulating visualisations. If we don't happen to have any music like this at hand, it's better to play in silence, simply filtering sounds from our surroundings. In the game world, these sounds will become something different, with a new meaning, an integral part of the scenery, story and events.

### **Introductions**

Yes, you can have something like a scenario in psychodrama. An appropriate introduction can help get at the heart of the game and begin a truly amazing story. So it would be good if one player had a draft of the situation ready in their head, something to inspire others and make them involved in developing the adventure further. This doesn't make that player anything like a game master – he just starts it. Even if he has a longer scenario ready, it'll soon get out of control – others will take the initiative and unleash the power of the game. No one can control a psychodrama session on their own. So, an average introduction is just a few words, plus one special bit, a hook, a mystery, or idea. It needn't be anything very detailed, well thought out or original; things like that don't affect the quality of the game. It's only the first step.

Here are a few sample introductions:

- 1) We're coming back home from a party at night. We've taken a shortcut to the bus stop through the woods. It's another two hours till the first bus leaves. They say there's a cemetery near here, in these woods, close to the road we're walking along... And sometimes you can hear voices there... Look! This must be it... Can you see it? Over there, among the trees... Shall we go in? Just for a minute. We have plenty of time. Come on, you're not afraid, are you?...
- 2) Yesterday we arrived in the country, at my grandma's place. It's night. But what's wrong with the people here? They're a bit weird... Why is the church locked? And everybody's so quiet... Hey! Can you hear that? Some kind of gentle music, coming from the woods... or from the church... But at night?...
- 3) We're sitting in someone's home, one of us. One person wants to stand up, but their legs refuse...! The others have the same problem. What's wrong? Is the stove giving off carbon monoxide?...
- 4) The party is in full swing. Suddenly, the lights go out. We go downstairs to the cellar to see if the fuses have blown. But look! Over there, at the far end of the cellar... Is that a door...?
- 5) We visited the archaeological exhibition at the museum and they accidentally locked us in for the night...
- 6) We've arrived at an old tourist hostel in thickly wooded mountains. We're renting a room for a role-playing session... It's evening...



- 7) We're crossing the main city square. The traffic is heavy; buses, trams... We're busy talking. All of a sudden... a deafening tram bell! We take a huge leap! Oh my God! It could have run us over! But... where is everybody? Why is it so dark? Look, there's a book lying there on the tracks! A bible...

You can easily come up with dozens of introductions like these, but you don't actually have to. Feel free to recycle the same introduction again and again; each time, the action will develop in a different direction and you'll get new results. An introduction may be as short as a few words, but it must inspire the players, allow them to spin a dark mystery tale. Does it take a lot of imagination to make such drafts into amazing stories? Maybe, but we needn't worry much about coherence, credibility, and realism, and our heads are filled with hundreds of books, films, ideas, associations and such.

During a psychodrama session, these veins of gold become uncovered in strange ways, often surprising ourselves. Yes, it's improvisation, but each of its elements comes about through the abilities of more than one person. After all, the floor belongs to any player with something to say. Here, there's no GM to suffer from a temporary lack of ideas and improvisational impotence; a player suffering from these simply becomes a passive listener or participant in what others create until their problems go away.

## Tricks.....

Here are a few tricks typical of the peculiar language of psychodrama.

### **Silence**

The game is made up of the players' voices, of noises and sounds and nothing else. Suddenly, you fall silent... When the others notice you haven't said anything for a while, they may call out for you. You're still silent... What can they do? They wonder what's happened to you. Now your silence has become meaningful, and a twist in the plot.

### **Vision not Shared**

A player contributes, adding another piece to the puzzle, for example by saying '*Can you hear the bell? Look, there's a church over there... Here in the deep forest...*' You reply, '*What are you talking about? What's wrong with you? What bell? I can't see any church...*' Others join you: '*Do you feel all right? You must be hallucinating...*' The others have rejected something 'perceived' by a player, making it into an illusion, hallucination, fever, or something even worse. You've made that person insane...

### **Victim**

At some point you say to one of the players (or about them), *'Are you okay? You look a bit strange. Fuck! Your eyes! What's wrong with you?!...'* You've picked on a player and made them an object of your description; against their will you've persuaded the others that there's something wrong with that person. If the other players chime in, that person will be in for a rough ride... As though you've become their game master.

Of course, psychodrama isn't about bickering, trick warfare or anything like that. It's about common fun and a group adventure. Use these tricks sparingly and carefully, and if the victim happens to be you, try to shoulder it and play it well. You should be able to enrich and enliven the game incredibly with it. It's not about winning anyway.

I've just explained a few sample tricks using the peculiar nature of the language of psychodrama, based on dialogue and co-creativity. When the session begins, you'll most likely come up with many more, and I'd hate to spoil the fun for you.

### **The Mysterious Session Pattern.....**

Taking part in psychodrama sessions with various people, I noticed a repeating pattern:

The first part of the game delves into the mystery, into an increasingly dark and psychologically dingy atmosphere, into more and more negative emotions. It's like descending, like a competitive bidding of terrifying and depressing ideas. As soon as you think there might be some light at the end of the tunnel, another player destroys that hope mercilessly, turning it into yet another face of evil. Darkness and despair envelop the players more and more closely, leaving less and less hope flickering in their hearts.

The second stage is extreme fatigue and weariness with the situation. You can't stand it a moment longer.

Finally, a player begins to fight their way back up, towards the light. New hope and enthusiasm enters them, they shake off the powerlessness and darkness, and pull the others up with them, with great effort at first, stumbling and tripping. This is the third stage. The end is a kind of relief and catharsis.



Every session I've participated in looked like this, although of course only in very general and abstract outline. They certainly weren't identical. In the mental state described above, ingenuity and brilliance manifests; your imagination comes up with truly overwhelming visions, amazing associations and juxtapositions. They become imprinted on your memory for a very long time. And it happens in a game you can play at any time, almost anywhere and without preparing anything, one which only lasts about an hour.

## Variations.....

I still want to add a few words about variations on this form. Once you've become familiar with the game's language, with its techniques, tricks, and so on, you may want to try to introduce some modifications. Here are some examples:

### 1) Play in another genre:

- Cyberpunk: log in...
- Fantasy: travel the ancient highways in the depths of vast forests. The trees are hundreds of metres high, it's always dark, light hardly ever penetrates through the vault of foliage...
- SF: it's the 30th day on a spaceship travelling from Earth to Jupiter, and you have something aboard... the computer goes crazy, your scan has detected something strange...
- Travel on a balloon, high above the clouds. You're carried into dense fog. After a while, the balloon makes a huge descent. You emerge from the mists, beneath the roof of clouds. You look down and see...
- Play in the world of one of the popular RPGs, the world of a film, a book, etc. Or decide on your characters before the session, as in traditional role-playing.

2) Make the game even more similar to traditional role-playing; allow for some form of storytelling in addition to dialogue. Every few minutes, a player takes over as game master to describe a place or event, e.g. *The whole village spreads along one road; so old it must be ancient. At dawn and dusk, you see farmers shuffling down the road, prodding a few cows or lugging a bucket of water from a neighbour's well. Sometimes, a clattering cart goes by...* etc.

Introducing narration and allowing literary language gives a much wider scope for creating events and worlds, but at the cost of empathy. They make the session closer to role-playing (I wrote about evaluating types of games earlier). Well, nothing is free.

3) Or you can make the game more similar to drama, giving one of the players the responsibility of acting out the encountered NPCs.

4) A player can bring a general outline for a scenario with them to a session (not physically, of course), an idea of how the story might develop, and introduce a bit of it occasionally. (They may have just read an interesting book.) This lets you avoid possible pauses if you all run out of inspiration at the same time. Or you can prepare more detailed and elaborate introductions and deliver them as narration.

## In Conclusion.....

Even in traditional RPGs, you don't play to win. But psychodrama is even less a game than a role-playing game. You don't compete, you don't solve mysteries and problems handed down by a GM, you don't follow the outline of their scenario; you don't learn a story prepared by them. Rather, we learn about the mysteries in ourselves, reach deep into our imaginations, discover our associations, our minds. It's a little like dreaming, but you're awake.

Well, try it out. Play it and see how it works for you. I'm going to end the article here – and go and explore the depths of my mind...



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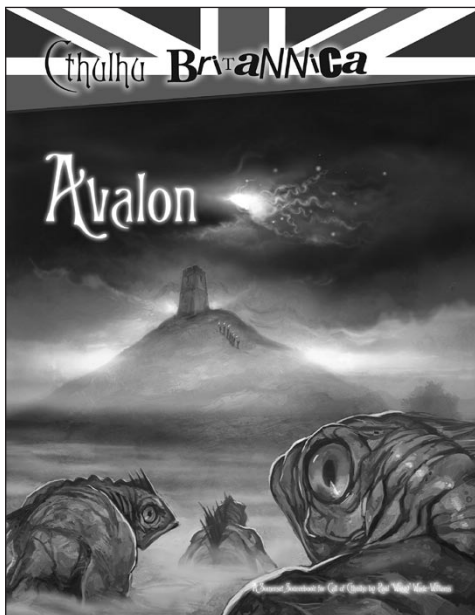
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