

WITH A PINCH OF SALT



Zombies in Call of Cthulhu
by Marcus L. Rowland

One of the horrors facing anyone who investigates the Cthulhu Mythos is the discovery that many apparently absurd legends are true. One example is the tale of the zombie, an undead human obeying the will of the conjurer who resurrected it. Zombies feature in the legends of many cultures, but are shrouded in so many myths that the truth is extremely hard to find. This problem is complicated by the fact that there are several distinct types of zombie, each showing different features and possessing different strengths and vulnerabilities, and furthermore that there is a form of insanity which induces zombie-like behaviour.

'DEATH' IN LIFE - THE HISTORICAL ZOMBIE

There are many tales of men and women becoming zombies by enchantment, passing from life to living death with little warning. Such creatures are slack-featured, emotionless, move slowly, and seem incapable of understanding anything beyond the most simple instructions. Their masters (usually powerful medicine men) use them for farming and simple labouring tasks where their slow reactions and clumsiness will not be a handicap, and may become immensely rich on the profits of zombie labour. Sometimes, but only very rarely, such zombies will apparently recover and escape from their masters, though their recovery may never be complete.

This form of zombie isn't dangerous in itself, but is a frightening warning of the power of the controlling sorcerer. The population of the surrounding area know that they can also be turned into zombies, and will rarely dream of defying the magician. Some isolated areas may be completely dominated by such zombie lords, though most of the population will remain normal since they are better able to serve their master in this form. For example, a gang of ten or so zombies would probably be led by a normal human. Human followers of a zombie lord are much more dangerous than the zombies themselves; many gain wealth and status from their master's power over zombies, and will fight to protect their position.

Keeper's Notes

This form of zombie is well-documented, with several real cases scientifically explained. Natural poisons are capable of inducing a prolonged state in which the victim effectively has no will. Given a sufficiently large dose the victim will never recover. Synthetic drugs with similar effects, and therapies to counter some of these poisons, were discovered in the 1970s and 1980s, but some of these drugs are still extremely obscure. In a 1920s campaign the cause and treatment of this condition will be a complete mystery; in any campaign the cause may be something very different, a genuine manifestation of magic or the Cthulhu Mythos.

The mechanism of this form of zombie 'recruitment' is fairly simple. Servants of the zombie master find a suitable victim and slip an initial dose of the poison into food or drink. It may also be delivered by poisoned arrow or dart, as a cloud of inhaled dust, or by more conventional injection. This initial dose leaves the victim docile and suggestible, ready to follow the recruiters to their master. Later the victim is given a larger dose under conditions designed to heighten suggestibility. For example, the victim might be taken to a prolonged religious ceremony, and fed the drug at intervals during the ritual. By participating in chants and rhythmic movements the victim falls deeper under the control of the magician

If the process is primarily chemical this ceremonial element is not an essential part of the process; it simply helps to 'program' the zombie for its role as a living automaton. 'Scientific' zombie masters may simply use hypnotism or other forms of conditioning instead. If control is enforced magically the ceremony is vital, used to gather power to suppress the victim's will. The initial drug dose is simply used to keep the victim in a trance state until the spell can be cast. In either case occasional reinforcement of the treatment may be needed to keep the victims' will suppressed, but this will be at intervals of weeks or months. Sometimes the effect will be truly permanent, only reversible by powerful drugs or magic.

Living 'zombies' have no initiative, and will continue actions (eg, filling a tub from a well) until directed to perform a new activity. They won't try to obey orders in ways that leave them at an advantage, or twist them to find loopholes in instructions. They can't explain their conditions; usually they can't talk at all.

Game Mechanics

Each form of living zombification takes place in two stages, the first being a dose of poison. This initial dose is a 2d6 + 2 potency poison against CON. It takes effect after 1d4 rounds. If the poison overcomes CON then POW is effectively reduced to 1; the victim has no free will, and will obey any instruction. DEX is also reduced by 1d6. If the poison fails to overcome CON, POW is reduced by half the potency of the poison; the victim becomes more suggestible, and must roll against 5xPOW to resist orders, again losing 1d6 DEX. Both effects last 1d3 + 1 hours; when the poison wears off the victim regains a point of POW per 2d4 minutes, but feels ill and sluggish for at least 20-Con hours after it wears off. DEX won't be recovered without several hours' sleep. An immediate and successful attempt to Treat Poison halves POW and DEX losses.

Occasionally recruitment begins with a magical attack, which drains POW and leaves the victim vulnerable to suggestion, rather than poisoning. In such cases the magician should match magic points against the victim; if the victim is overcome orders will be obeyed until the magician releases the spell, at the cost of a magic point an hour. This is comparatively rare, since it brings the magician into direct contact with the victim and has no effect if the spell fails.

If zombification is primarily chemical, the ritual which follows involves repeated doses of a more powerful drug, once every 5 + 1d6 minutes. The drug is a potency 10 poison, each dose reducing POW by 1d4 and DEX by 1d4, halved if the poison is resisted. Zombie masters who are experienced with these drugs can continue the ritual until the victim's personality is completely suppressed (POW drops to 1), and won't be fooled by attempts to fake zombification. As a by-product of the loss of POW all magic points are lost.

For the equivalent magical ritual the magician must use personal magic points to overcome the victim's magic points. Once successful, the magician and accomplices can pool magic points against the victim. During a 3d6 minute period of preparation each participant in the ritual is required to donate up to three magic points to the spell caster. Each time the victim's magic points are overcome the victim loses 1d4 POW and 1d2 DEX. The procedure is repeated at intervals of 3d6 minutes until the victim is reduced to 1 POW. Again, all magic points are lost. Magicians using spells of this type lose 1d4 SAN on the first casting, none thereafter.

Once either treatment is complete there is a period of 2d10 + 10 days in which no POW can be regained. After this there is a cumulative 1% per day chance (to a maximum of 20%) of player characters





regaining 1 POW; NPCs will rarely recover unaided. Once POW begins to return the victim can attempt to disobey orders or escape; only one attempt can be made per day, on a roll against 5xPOW. Naturally zombie masters are alert for signs of returning willpower, and will repeat the treatment as often as seems necessary. Magic-using zombie masters may even be able to cast the spell at long range, though the number of magic points used to suppress POW should be doubled.

Optional Rule: If the victim isn't rescued and doesn't escape there is a cumulative 1% chance per week (after the first month) of permanent brain damage, removing a point of POW and 1d2 INT. Once this occurs the keeper should continue to roll for damage each week, but should not increase the chance of damage. Damage continues until POW and INT are reduced to 1.

If living zombies are rescued they can be treated medically or by psychotherapy; either approach requires difficult research and library work to have any effect, especially in a 1920s campaign. Use the normal rules for psychotherapy and institutional disasters.

Victims of either form of living zombification lose 2d6 SAN during the zombification ritual (or 1d3 SAN if a SAN roll is made), and will remember everything experienced during the period without willpower. This means that any encounters with Cthuloid creatures and other horrors have their cumulative SAN effect when zombification ends! However, the delay will do something to cushion the blow of such experiences, and all such SAN losses should be halved.

Unexpected encounters with this type of zombie may cause the loss of 1d2 SAN, no loss if a SAN roll is made. The effect of seeing a loved one or friend in this form may cause the loss of 1d6 SAN (1 point if a SAN roll is successful), recovered if the victim can be rescued and cured. Statistics for such zombies are the same as those for any normal human, with the exception that POW is effectively reduced to zero, INT and EDU can't be used, and DEX is greatly reduced. Such zombies can't fight, and are more to be pitied than feared in themselves. If attacked they take normal damage, and can't dodge or parry.

'LIFE' IN DEATH - THE TRADITIONAL ZOMBIE

The traditional zombie is a genuine manifestation of the supernatural, a dead man or woman brought back to a semblance of life by sorcery. It's often assumed that the sorcerer responsible for such effects must always be evil; however, some neutral or benign magicians may also have mastered this process, though it's unlikely that this can be accomplished without some loss of SAN. Magicians who try to master this ability will probably drift towards evil, becoming involved in more and more dangerous spells and the terrifying horrors of the Cthulhu Mythos. The most damaging aspect of this spell is that it is apparently most successful

with recently deceased corpses; the magician is thus drawn to become involved in graverobbing and other ghoulish activities, and ultimately to ritual murder.

Superficially the traditional zombie resembles the living 'zombies' described above, and it's easy to confuse the two. However, the traditional zombie is permanently dead; if the spell which reanimates it is removed it will instantly 'die', and cannot be animated again. There are many variant forms, some hardly recognisable as zombies; if sufficient power is put into the spell the zombie will seem most normal, and casual observers may think that it is still alive.

Although the preparation of a zombie usually begins with a corpse, it's possible to begin with a living human who is murdered in the course of the zombification process. Such ritual murders are said to aid the magic, and magicians controlling many zombies of this type will almost certainly use this form of 'recruitment'.

Many legends suggest means of killing zombies of this type; the most common involves the use of salt, but there is little real evidence to support this story. Investigators will probably need to deal with the creatures on an individual basis, experimenting to find the best answer.

Keeper's Notes

Zombies of this type will probably be found under much the same circumstances as the living 'zombies' described above, and both types may occasionally be found together. If the zombies are reanimated natural deaths there's a slim chance that they may be ruled by a neutral or benign magician; however, it's more likely that those encountered in the course of *Call of Cthulhu* will have been created violently.

Zombie 'recruitment' for this type of ritual follows much the same procedure as described above. Usually it's more convenient to commit murder at a prepared site, rather than to kill victims during an abduction, so the same techniques of poisoning and abduction are used. The follow-up ceremony, though, is very different. The victim is ritually prepared then murdered (usually by slashing an artery), drained of blood, and converted to a zombie before rigor mortis sets in. Usually some form of embalming or preservative treatment is used to keep the corpse from deteriorating; in more primitive cultures this step may be omitted, and such zombies will soon decay, rotting and crawling with maggots and releasing a choking odour of death.

Zombies of this class are permanently dead, and require little or no 'maintenance', though the magician may occasionally need to cast a spell to maintain animation. Some magicians may become quite attached to their zombie servants, buying them new clothing and sewing back any parts that fall off. Such magicians are usually insane.

Zombies may also be created by a form of resurrection, but this is more difficult and

rarely produces a satisfactory servant. It's generally carried out only by 'white' magicians and those who aren't prepared to commit murder.

Game Mechanics

The most common form of traditional zombie is described in the *Call of Cthulhu* Sourcebook for the 1920s (p30 in first and second edition copies, p121 in the hardcover edition). The distinctive features of these creatures are enhanced strength and resistance to damage.

Preliminary recruitment follows the same pattern described above, with the victim's POW and free will suppressed.

The zombification ceremony consists of three stages, the first being summoning of magical energy as described above. Once the magician has some magic points in hand the ritual murder begins; the magician or an acolyte cuts an artery, and the victim begins to bleed to death, losing a hit point every 1d3 minutes. As blood is lost, the magician makes successive attempts to pit magic points against the victim's POW, at intervals of 1d6 minutes. If this attempt is unsuccessful the victim dies without becoming a zombie. If the attempt succeeds a point of POW remains in the body after death, keeping it alive.

At this stage the magician must establish control. The zombie will still have INT, though the last traces of consciousness will fade in INT x 1d6 minutes. The magician must establish that he (or she) is the master, pitting magic points against the victim's single point of POW. This is a comparatively easy process, but may require several attempts (at intervals of 2d3 minutes) to succeed. Victims 'rescued' during this part of the ceremony will believe that they are still alive, and may join in to fight the magician. If the magician is killed or driven off without establishing control the zombie will eventually lose all INT and run amok.

Once control is complete the zombie can be treated to prevent decay; usually this involves steeping in a chemical bath or the use of a minor spell to keep the body fresh. Generally this procedure is left to underlings while the magician recovers from the ritual. If the magician wants the zombie to look more human, additional magic points must be expended; for example, an additional 5 points might give the zombie some vaguely human expression in its face, though not much.

The only alternative to violent zombification is the use of a variant of the Resurrection spell described in the *Call of Cthulhu* rules. For this spell the body need not be destroyed, but will be reactivated in the state in which it died, and can never be anything more than a mindless zombie. The spell costs 1d10 SAN on first casting, 1d3 SAN per casting thereafter, and 1d6 magic points per casting, plus a point for each day the body has been dead.

Although omitted from the *Call of Cthulhu* rules, encounters with this type of zombie should affect SAN; 1d2 on first encounter with an obvious zombie (unless





a SAN roll is made), a 1d2 SAN loss (SAN roll negates) if an apparent human is positively identified as a zombie. Finding a friend or loved one converted to a zombie should cost 1d6 SAN.

REANIMATION

In this scientific equivalent of zombification, the scientist uses arcane chemical and electrical processes to restore a semblance of life to a corpse, and may even assemble parts of several corpses to form a body which is then reanimated. Often the creature formed will be very like the traditional zombie described above, and scientists may feel that they have successfully created or restored life. However, it seems more likely that such scientists are unconsciously using magic to sustain life after death, with many of the trappings of scientific resurrection (towering machines with flashing lights, elaborate chemical baths, and powerful electrical discharges) simply acting to focus the scientist's will and magic points. The behaviour traditionally associated with such experimentation consists of a period of research, followed by frenzied laboratory work, building up to a climax which eventually leaves the scientist tired and drained; it's possible that the scientist feels drained because he or she has unconsciously performed a powerful feat of magic.

Reanimators are often forced to associate with grave robbers or resort to murder to ensure a supply of fresh corpses, and their research will often lead to more intimate and eventually self-destructive contact with the Cthulhu Mythos. It often seems as though some destructive creature (possibly Nyarlathotep) delights in granting these reanimators enough knowledge to ensure partial success, which leads them to dabble on the fringes of the Mythos. The creatures they create are rarely controllable, and are frequently the cause of the scientists' destruction.

Keeper's Information

Reanimation is an extremely complex procedure requiring years of research and

study. Scientists wishing to perfect the process should have a minimum total of 200% skill in three or more relevant sciences; for example, Chemistry, Pharmacy, and Zoology. Given these minimum qualifications, such scientists must spend at least fifty percent of their waking time in studies and research work. For each six-month period in which this course of study is followed, the scientist should make a Library Use roll. If successful the scientist gains 1d6% knowledge in a new skill, **Reanimation**, and must make a SAN roll or lose 1d2 SAN. Certain rare books may be used to enhance this ability, in the same way that Mythos books can improve Cthulhu Mythos knowledge, with an increased chance of SAN loss. For example, Herbert West's research notes might give 15% Reanimation knowledge, if a successful Reanimation skill roll was made, but the reader would lose 2d6 SAN (1d3 SAN if a SAN roll was made). Often books containing Reanimation lore will also touch upon the Cthulhu Mythos, with consequent additional SAN loss. The exact nature of such works is left to the keeper.

Reanimation research also tends to be extremely expensive; as scientists learn more they will try to assemble more elaborate laboratory equipment, and junk old and discredited technology. Scientists involved in this research should expect to spend approximately \$500 (£100 at '20s rates) for each 1% of Reanimation knowledge, in equipment and materials, plus a minimum of \$500 plus (50 x Reanimation rating) dollars per year in supplies, maintenance, and other expenses. For example, a professor with 50% reanimation knowledge would have spent \$25,000 (£5,000) on equipment and other permanent facilities, over the course of several years, and would have running expenses of around \$3,000 (£600) per year. On a professor's wages this could easily be a severe problem; devising a suitable grant application and cover story may be the hardest part of the reanimation research.

Reanimation experiments may be attempted at any stage of a reanimator's career, with the chance of success equivalent to Reanimation skill. Usually only one attempt is possible in any given six-month period; the rest of the time is spent on small scale and animal experiments, and in

attempts to get hold of the components (such as freshly-deceased human corpses) needed for the work. Successful reanimation experiments don't necessarily lead to the creation of a complete zombie. In the early stages they are more likely to produce useful information which adds 1d4 to Reanimation knowledge for the next round of research and experimentation, and costs 1d6 Magic Points and 1d3 SAN (1 SAN if a SAN roll is made).

The keeper should decide if these experiments will ever be allowed to succeed, and determine the consequences of success. Usually a reanimated corpse will resemble the 'traditional' zombie described above, though in some cases it will seem to have a genuine personality. Such cases may, however, be caused by possession, as described below. In either case removal of the magic or possessing spirit which keeps the body animated will result in instant and permanent death. SAN effects are as the 'traditional' zombie.

POSSESSION

Sometimes a corpse may be animated by the spirit of another being. The motives of such interlopers can vary from malevolence to curiosity; often they are totally alien. The sophistication of their imitation of human life varies with the intelligence and power of the invading spirit. In some cases the resulting creature is little more than a zombie, in others the invading presence is so powerful that there is no easy way of spotting the deception. Powerful sorcerers (and possibly scientific reanimators) may be able to capture such entities and use them to animate their zombies; if so, they will usually be programmed to obey their 'creators' commands.

In some cases these creatures may be responsible for the deaths of their host bodies, as part of some sinister (or wholly incomprehensible) plan requiring their presence on Earth. If the possessing spirit is driven out the body will remain dead; in cases of possession of a living body the host





personality remains present but is dormant until the intruder is driven out.

Keeper's Information

Possession of a corpse will occur if a human is killed under circumstances favourable to the invading entity involved; for example, someone killed in a temple sacred to Cthugha might be invaded by a Fire Vampire. In general, possession is only possible where the invading personality isn't firmly tied to a physical body. In the above example, a Fire Vampire is essentially a shifting formless cloud of gas whose composition will continually change, and the controlling essence will be a very small part of the cloud. The Great Race of Yith may occasionally use this method, when their telepathic time travel 'tunes in' to someone as they are killed; this would be a very rare occurrence, since there is evidence that the Great Race have servants who research the lifeline of their human hosts before invading them.

Directed possession (summoning a Mythos creature and directing it to occupy a corpse) requires knowledge of the appropriate Summoning and Binding spells, and a ritual comparable to the creation of the traditional zombie described above. In this case there is no need to drain blood or suppress the victim's POW; the victim is simply killed as soon as the summoning is successful, and the summoned spirit takes control of the fresh corpse. For this technique the body needs to be as fresh and intact as possible, and the masters of this technique have perfected quick and painless attacks which leave easily repairable damage. In many cases these involve use of the Martial Arts skill described in *Masks of Nyarlathotep*. Other possible methods include drowning, freezing, or suffocation, though the first two would be very inappropriate for a Fire Vampire!

Although the invading spirit is bound to the host corpse, it isn't necessarily under the control of the magician or scientist who summons it; it may be necessary to perform another binding ritual to keep the zombie under control.

Zombies created by this technique will have the INT, POW, and DEX of the invading

spirit, and the STR, CON, and SIZ of the host corpse. The invading spirit has full knowledge of all spells, and may have powers related to those of the invading spirit. For example, a human corpse possessed by a Fire Vampire spirit might have the power of pyrokinesis, causing fires without physical contact.

Zombies created by possession are probably the most dangerous type. Luckily they rarely make loyal servants, though it's possible that such a zombie might be created at the instigation of the invading spirit, as part of some complex plan of destruction.

Another form of possession is mind swapping, used by the Great Race of Yith and some other creatures. In this form the personalities from two bodies are swapped. Usually this is permanent, though sometimes it's possible to swap back. Some powerful magicians can transfer their own personalities this way, swapping bodies with a younger host to achieve a form of immortality. Usually a prerequisite is a ritual or drug to suppress the victim's POW; exact details are beyond the scope of this article.

PARASITISM

Sometimes a corpse may be reanimated by an invading disease or parasite which is capable of reactivating the body. Such reanimated corpses are usually 'programmed' for stereotyped behaviour which will help spread the infection, such as the murder of uninfected humans. This type of infection may also be controlled by a sufficiently resourceful magician or scientist, and the disease might thus be used to kill victims and convert them directly into zombies.

Keeper's Information

Infection is most effective in isolated areas with poor communication; in such areas the disease may get a firm hold before anyone realises what is happening. The disease will usually be vulnerable to some natural or synthetic cure, such as modern antibiotics; there's no need for the keeper to make such a cure easy to find. If the disease is cured

the patient dies, since the infection only affects dead tissues. Infection may cause the host body to become unnaturally strong, much like the traditional zombie described above.

AUTOMATISM

One final cause of zombie-like behaviour is automatism, a form of insanity in which the mind 'switches off', leaving the body repetitively performing some simple action. Usually these actions have some relevance to the events which caused the insanity; a victim might go through the motions of drawing and firing a gun, raising the hands to ward off an attacker, and so on. Such 'automatons' can often be made to perform different activities, such as sweeping a floor or polishing a table. Once a pattern of movement is established it will be continued indefinitely, even if circumstances change; for example, sweeping movements would be continued even if the broom was taken away. Sometimes automatism is associated with phobias and other forms of insanity.

Keeper's Information

'Automatons' can be made to perform actions by moving their hands and pushing them through the correct sequence. After a few repetitions the movements will continue spontaneously. Victims of automatism can sometimes be cured by psychotherapy, using the normal rules for treatment and institutional disasters.

In general, automatism is a fairly random effect of insanity; it's unlikely that a zombie work force of the type described above could be recruited by driving victims insane in this way. However, it's possible that some Mythos creatures may be able to induce this effect deliberately. It's also possible that genuine zombies might be disguised as automatons; for example, as inmates of an asylum run by Cultists. Automatism is a particularly appropriate form of insanity for anyone driven insane by seeing zombies or witnessing a zombification ritual.

