

The Revised Elric of R'lyeh

A setting for the *Call of Cthulhu* and *Stormbringer* RPGs

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Introduction

Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Ylrhc R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!

This monograph distils my notes on *Elric of R'lyeh*: a mashup of Chaosium's *Stormbringer* and *Call of Cthulhu* RPGs set in an alternate 1920s Earth governed by Moorcock's cosmology of Law and Chaos. I used the setting for two games: one set in the independent Young Kingdoms of America, and the other on the Dreaming Isle of Great Britain.

In this world the Lords of Law and Chaos walk among humans, Melnibonean blood mingles with human as the ancient race struggles to hold on to its identity, and Elementals and Beasts hold court. The churches of Law and Chaos are the major political force in the human realm — but they are a facade concealing a reality nearly incomprehensible to humans.

Themes

for Earth alone was lawful and constituted of ordered matter, drifting in the sea of Chaos-stuff as it had done for aeons.

- from *Earl Aubec*

We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.

- from *The Call of Cthulhu*

From Lovecraft and *Call of Cthulhu* we get components of mystery, secrecy, and the Mythos that represents an uncaring universe of vast cosmic forces where man is irrelevant. From Moorcock and *Stormbringer* we get an Empire in decay, humans as pawns of the Gods, and personal relationships with higher forces through declarations of allegiance to Law, Chaos and the Balance.

There are some thematic clashes to resolve, such as the nature of Gods — is there any relationship between the Outer Gods and the churches of Law and Chaos? Why would the Outer Gods seek human worship or allegiance? Hopefully these will be resolved by the end of this text.

Books and Game Systems

In addition to Moorcock's Elric stories I recommend the short story *Earl Aubec*. For Lovecraft I recommend Cthulhu Chick's omnibus or Project Gutenberg.

The game systems I use are *Call of Cthulhu* 4th edition, *Stormbringer* 4th edition and *Elric!* (aka *Stormbringer* 5th edition). This is mostly for convenience as it's easy to take sub-systems from the different games and mix them together. But it's worth acknowledging

Mongoose's *Elric of Melnibone* RPG (for writing and system, not production quality). For *Call of Cthulhu* alternatives you can take your pick.



Legend

It was as if some enormous sun, thousands of times larger than Earth's, had sent a ray of light pulsing through the cosmos, defying the flimsy barriers of Time and Space, to strike upon the great black battlefield.

- from *Stormbringer*

When Elric blew the Horn of Fate a rent in time and space allowed the Gods of Law to pass into our world and do battle with Chaos. Eventually the power of the Horn swept all gods away and ushered in a new age and new world — a world that becomes our own, both geographically and metaphysically.

But who was Elric, what was Stormbringer, and what was the Horn of Fate?

Aubec

Aubec is worth mentioning briefly. Tricked by Myshella, Empress of the Dawn he expanded the borders of the known world, creating Law where there was Chaos. Some consider Aubec to be a proto-Elric; a catalyst that caused the collapse of the Bright Empire and eventual reshaping of the world. There are references to Aubec as Elric's distant ancestor in at least one credible source.

Elric

The Church of Law's version is a moral tale. Elric was a Melnibonean sorcerer who grasped at cosmic forces, upsetting the Balance. He was entombed for his hubris by both Law and Chaos.

Other interpretations have Elric as a renegade elder god, a metaphor for the overreaching of the Melnibonean race, a prophet who witnessed the cataclysm at R'lyeh, or even an alien destructive force that united Law and Chaos in opposing it. Law considers many of these are apocryphal and/or heretical. As for the other Church... like Chaos itself, accounts are messy and contradictory. In general Chaos tolerates a wide variation in the creation myth.

While the most popular legend is around the apocalyptic events at R'lyeh, the fables of Elric's deeds are numerous and variable. He commanded the attention of Beasts and Elementals, walked in the Dreamlands under different guises, and waged war under a number of names. For the most part accounts are considered unreliable, but there is a significant body of academic study concerning pre-Common Era theology and archaeology. Evidence for various legends — often from abandoned Melnibonean colonies — has been found on all continents but in particular Africa, Australia, Oceania, and the Antarctic.

R'lyeh

Elric made his last stand at the cyclopean city of R'lyeh. It's not clear if only the location was important, or if the city held some power — some accounts suggest it contained (or

was itself) a preternatural machine of destruction. Others call it Elric's home, though there is a problem of scale as it was intended for a race much larger than Melnibonean or Mabden — but it's possible "home" is a mistranslation. Whatever occupied the structure was an earlier form of humanoid, possibly one of Blavatsky's "second Race" of "heterogeneous gigantic semi-human monsters".

The location of R'lyeh is hotly disputed — it's popularly located in the Pacific, though other areas such as the Canaries, the Mediterranean and even inland (e.g. Bolivia) have their theories. Over the past 200 years there have been numerous claims that R'lyeh has been found — and while much of the evidence is tenuous there's a mounting belief that it represents a class of Melnibonean colony that is quite distinct from the romantic "dreaming spires" of Imyrr and the like.

Stormbringer

Stormbringer is frequently depicted as a sword, and was certainly a weapon of some kind — though opinions are divided as to whether it actually existed, or was only symbolic of Elric's destructive power. Some myths describe it as "Elric's Shadow" or "The Black Man"; either it acted independently of him, or was some aspect of Elric which existed simultaneously in many different locations. Law's interpretation depicts Stormbringer as an expression of Elric's base impulses, but there is an alternative view — one which was considered heresy until a few hundred years ago — that Elric was entirely subordinate to his sword.

The Horn of Fate

For the most part the Horn of Fate is considered symbolic, though it could also have been a physical object. It appears to share aspects with, and is used interchangeably with both Stormbringer and R'lyeh. It is characterised by “a thin, monotonous whine from inconceivable, unlighted chambers beyond Time”. Some texts say the horn is an instrument carried by servants of Elric, who is “the mad white-faced god, howling blindly to the piping of two amorphous idiot flute-players”.



History

“So it is over,” Moonglum murmured. “All gone — Elwher, my birthplace, Karlaak by the Weeping Waste, Bakshaan, even the Dreaming City and the Isle of Melnibone. They no longer exist, they cannot be retrieved.”

- from *Stormbringer*

For the most part assume that history in the alternate 1920's Earth runs parallel to our own. We are between two great wars, the Americas (the “Young Kingdoms”) have been independent for more than 2 centuries, and the British (Melnibonean) Empire will shortly be in decline. Britain is part way through introducing Women's Suffrage. Al Capone is bootlegging alcohol in Chicago.

Age and Melnibonean Blood

Note that depending on how much Melnibonean blood a person has, their lifespan may be hundreds of years (though supposedly none are older than Elizabeth herself). This presents interesting opportunities with inserting living historical persons into the 20th century (for example Elias Ashmole featured in my Oxford game) — you just contrive to give them a bit of Melnibonean heritage in their family tree.

Timeline of the Common Era

This is a sample timeline, mainly focused around Europe.

0-500 – AGE OF LAW

Elric defies the gods and is entombed at R'lyeh, which sinks. The Atlantic Ocean is named the Boiling Sea. The Bright Empire withdraws to British Isles; the Western Ocean is named the Boiling Sea and becomes impassable for nearly 1500 years.

Maximillian von Becque founds the Roman Church of Law. Roman occupation of British Isles. Over the next 400 years the remaining Melnibonean estates offer token resistance. The majority of the Melnibonean families retreat north.

At the end of this period a sudden resurgence in support for the old Melnibonean feudal estates, bolstered by Romano-British, sees the Church of Law retreat to mainland Europe where it remains the dominant power.

500-1000 – AGE OF THE CONSTRUCTION.

British Isles resist influence of Law and is widely held to be haunted, inhabited by ancient sorcerer-kings and frightened tribes of humans.

Capital of the Church of Law established at the ancient pre-collapse city of Byzantium.

1000-1500 – AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT.

British Isles invaded by William who establishes his United Kingdom and begins the reconstruction of the largely superstitious and Chaos-aligned Britain.

The Church of Law is re-established in Britain. At the same time the Court of Chaos is put in place to satisfy (the vanity of) the remaining Melnibonean estates on the island. The southern estates join the alliance of the Church of Law and the Court of Chaos under the British Monarch, though in the North the estates refuse to bow to the alliance and a bloody war ensues which is never fully resolved, only conceded. The North becomes known as the Lands of a Thousand Cults, where Beast and Elemental pacts are common.

At this time the old cities of Melnibone are rediscovered and William arbitrates on the rightful stewardship of the settlements. Oxford is one such city, and becomes a principle seat of learning. Towards the end of this period the collapse of the Byzantine Empire is imminent, to be replaced by the modern European structure.

Columbus crosses the Boiling Sea and rediscovers the Western Lands.

1500-PRESENT – MODERN AGE; THE AGE OF EMPIRE; THE REDISCOVERY OF MELNIBONE.

In Britain the influence of Law spreads as cities prosper and the precepts of Law supplant the old allegiances to the cults of Chaos; however in rural areas local cult worship is common.

Queen Elizabeth comes to the throne in Britain after a brutal war of succession following the death of her father, Henry. As it happens this profoundly influences the Balance between Law and Chaos throughout Europe. Had her sister Mary succeeded their father

it is likely that Mary would have founded New Byzantium and a second Great Age of Law would have resulted; instead Elizabeth sought a balance between the Church of Law and the Courts of Chaos, and the latter was able to establish itself in the political landscape. This was the great Renaissance of Chaos, with the rediscovery of the arcane sciences and a resurgence in magic. The British Empire — also known as the Second Bright Empire — is established during this time, and spreads throughout the modern world as far as the New World to the West, and Asiaticommunista to the East.

The “Romance of Melnibone” is a phrase used for the romantic sensibilities of old Melnibone, the rediscovery of Melnibonean relics and knowledge and a reconnection with the spirit of Melnibone which Elizabeth sees as a continuation of the work of William’s Reconstruction. As part of the Rediscovery, the pioneers of the new Bright Empire travel west across the Boiling Sea and successfully land in the New World. Colonies of the Bright Empire are established there until the war of Independence, and formation of the United States (called the Young Kingdoms by the Bright Empire).



Melnibone

They were tall and slender, with slanting almond eyes, ears which came almost to points. While the eyes of some of them were like those of ordinary men, others had eyes that were purple and yellow, others had eyes that were flecks of blue and silver which sparkled constantly. They seemed a proud and intelligent people and were plainly given to avoiding most of their fellows. Yet Ilian also knew that these could be the cruellest of all the invaders. “Call them Eldren, call them Vadaugh, call them Melniboneans,” Jhary-a-Conel had said to her, “but remember that these are renegades all of some kind, else they would not league themselves with Ymryl.”

- *The Champion of Garathorm*

This section deals with Melniboneans, mostly in the context of a British setting. For more colour both *Melnibone* (Chaosium) and *Bright Shadows* (Mongoose) cover the Melnibonean race, and they're worth mining for ideas.

Rise of the Melnibonean Middle Class

A large part of our alternate 1920s requires Man and Melnibonean to rub shoulders. In the British Isles the Melniboneans are the ruling race; but to a large part their survival has been contingent on mixing and breeding with humans.

The net effect of breeding is a gradual expansion of Melnibonean blood out from the social elite into the middle class, stratifying the middle classes further and fuelling British class obsession (this is much like the “time of thin blood” in the *Vampire* except Human and Melnibonean are part of the same class structure). The most powerful (and purest) Melniboneans keep themselves relevant to society through allowing their blood to propagate through the lower ranks. Clearly this isn't a sustainable situation, but for now it's the social backdrop of the Second Bright Empire.

What about the Young Kingdoms? Since the United States broke away from the Empire, they are divided over the importance of Melnibonean blood. In the more meritocratic parts of the Union being Melnibonean may imply wealth, but nothing more. In the traditionalist areas the feudal structures remain to keep the human rabble out. In some pro-Human states, the gated Melnibonean communities may be as much to keep the aliens in than the humans out.

How much this gets focus in your game is up to you; in an investigative game it may be enough to provide a backdrop, or you may want to dig deep into the different bloodlines and how they interact.

An alternate-Earth *Downton Abbey* with the Crawleys as cruel and ethereal Chaos-worshipping aliens being waited upon by their human slaves would be easy to do, but also easy to fall into class stereotypes. Both races will have their own anxieties over

retaining cultural identity and their place in the political landscape. There should be fear and mistrust, but counter examples of progressiveness, inclusiveness and perhaps most importantly optimism where the two races interact.

In fact, there should be opportunities to ask what it means to be Melnibonean and a citizen of the various nations. In this culture there is a high proportion of mixed race citizens (and no “pure” Melniboneans). Elizabeth’s “Romance of Melnibone” is a celebration of culture, and given the political structure of Melnibonean estates acting as local government (see below) it’s quite possible that the human commoners also identify as Melnibonean.

Slavery and Freedom

In the books Melnibone relies on her slaves, and (according to Chaosium’s *Melnibone*) the slave population outnumbers their masters 9:1. If the rule of thumb is for 99% of the population to be human, one in eleven humans is a “slave”, and 10% of the whole population are contained within Melnibonean households.

Melnibonean slaves are supposedly kept compliant with drugs but are otherwise well treated (with the exception of labour slaves). They perform various functions for their masters, up to and including teaching the Melnibonean young.

Here in the alternate 1920s, the obvious function of slaves is as an entourage to the Estate and performing a function of domestic service. Is it ever desirable for a free person to become a slave? What do the Estates look like to outsiders — are they well integrated with the local population, or are they closed off and secret? Are slaves really treated well,

and how does treatment vary between the Estates? And even if a slave has no voting power, do they still have some privilege conferred on them by virtue of their attachment?

Local and National Government

Elizabeth sought a balance between Law and Chaos in her new Bright Empire. In Britain the House of “Commons” has a seat for every Melnibonean estate on the island, though attendance varies. These are not elected, but inherited positions. The representation of each Estate is not just for the family but also the constituents of the Estate, and so functions as the local government and government representation for thousands of people.

The House of the Lords is something different. The Lords houses Elizabeth’s Court of Chaos as well as European representation from the Lords of Law. Elizabeth’s own Lords are the Variable Eight, and are given honorary titles as representatives of the Chaos Lords themselves. Lord Slortar, Lord Chardros and Lord Mabelrode are in constant residence, while other titles — Arioich, Xiombarg, Pyaray and others — change at the Queen’s whim, in a true reflection of Chaos.

International Politics

Europe is still under the control of Law and the seat of power is the Vatican. Elizabeth entertains both Law and Chaos in her court, and Vatican diplomats are in permanent residence in her Granbretan.

Aside from this very specific detail I don't intend to explore this further. Naturally there are interesting things going on in the period — attitudes to the British Empire in the inter-war period, the drive towards Women's Suffrage, the rise of national socialism in Germany — all of these can be adapted to the alternate world. How subtly you do that is up to you. The intention has always been to make use of actual history as much as possible, particularly if one wants to adapt existing CoCbooks to the alternate world.

Breeding and Status

Note: the interpretation below assumes an almost indefinite lifespan for “pure” Melniboneans, and deviates from Moorcock significantly. The intent is to signal the alien nature of Melnibonean genetic heritage and to raise a question mark over Elric's survival at R'lyeh (q.v.).

Melnibonean Blood

This is the rule of thumb I used. The three main tiers of Melnibonean/Human hybrid have an adjustment for Credit Rating.

Human: can be capable conjurers and sorcerers in exceptional cases, but no adjustments to stats otherwise. More than 99% of the population (population of the British Isles is approx 40 million, and the Bright Empire is 400 Million).

Lowest tier Melnibonean: gene was interrupted more than 3 generations ago, and breeding has since been exclusively with humans. May have slightly increased POW and CHA. Lifespan increases by perhaps 20% from normal human expectancy. Physical characteristics – eyes. Could pass for human except under careful scrutiny. Even chance of producing type 1 or 0 offspring with a human or near-human mate. One in every thousand (10%/20% to CR).

Middle tier: gene was interrupted less than 3 generations ago, or was interrupted earlier but there was a successful pairing with Melnibonean stock afterwards. May have slightly increased POW, CHA, SIZ and INT. Lifespan increases by 75% of human. Physical characteristics – eyes, shape of skull, ears. Could pass for human with some disguise skill. One in every 5,000, with 8000 in British Isles and 80000 in the Empire as a whole (30%/50% to CR).

Nobility: gene interrupted for less than 3 generations and successfully paired with Melnibonean stock. Will have increased SIZ, CHA, INT and POW. Lifespan is 250% of human. Physical characteristics – eyes, ears, skull, body frame, skin. Clearly half-breed (and alien to anyone lower born). One in every 500,000, with around 100 in the British Isles and just over 800 throughout the Empire. Mostly these are feudal lords or custodians of ancient Melnibonean estates (60%/90% to CR).

Elizabeth (and others?): Child of pure Melnibonean and human, or of Melnibonean parents with a minor interruption in the line. Will have greatly increased POW and

INT, and high CHA and SIZ (tall and beautiful). Lifespan 500% or more of human.
Appearance is as a true Melnibonean – but could a true Melnibonean tell the difference?

Elric: Pure Melnibonean. Lifespan 1000 human years +. High POW, INT, CHA, and SIZ.
Beautiful, powerful, unearthly, terrifying.

Social Rank

Often CoC defers to Credit Rating for interactions where social rank becomes important. This is highly contextual, in that it's using one's perceived status to bluff past requests for credentials, etc.

The Blood ratings have two numbers; the lower of the two is the bonus to Credit Rating that the breeding confers outside the Empire (in the Young Kingdoms), and the higher is the bonus conferred when dealing with people who care about your breeding. The bonus is largely conferred because, even if people don't respect the blood, there is old money behind it.

At the very highest tiers CR becomes irrelevant, of course.

Influencing Others

An opposed Credit Rating check could be used to influence another party. Here are some sample credit ratings, to be used in opposed rolls:

50: Central government officials, heads of institutions (colleges, trusts, military and civillian departments)

40: Local government representatives, senior members of colleges and institutions, feudal landowners

30: Academics and professionals

20: Merchants, scholars

10: Tradesmen, serving staff, soldiers

05: Apprentices to tradesmen, casual labour

0: homeless, criminals

o (n/a): Children and slaves



The 1920s

The world resembles our 1920s fairly closely — so the styles, professions, locations and technology levels should be roughly the same. Obviously Law and Chaos have replaced Christianity and other mainstream religions, but those changes should be subtle, such as the occasional arrow on a tie-pin or an eight-pointed brooch to accompany evening wear. Of course there is a proliferation of different faiths including both the mainstream Churches and lay beliefs (Elemental and Beast cults). But all in all 1920s life should appear similar to a regular CoC game.

Technology, Magic and Contrivance

In general technological advances — particularly those with complex parts — are instruments of Law. This includes the combustion engine, firearms, the victrola, the radio, and other complex machines. These are generally called “contrivances”, and their construction and servicing is sanctioned by the Church of Law. Ownership of technological contrivances has become commonplace over the last few centuries, such that Lawful devices are household objects.

The counterpoint to Law’s Contrivances are Demons of Chaos. In modern society these are considered old-fashioned and pagan practices, but there is no doubt that they are similarly functional — demons of Travel, demons of Knowledge, and demons of Combat are common. Demons often imitate the contrivances of Law, for example

Demons of Combat may be bound into the form of firearms, and Demons of Transport may appear as cars.

Attitudes to Weapons

Weapons are openly carried in almost all parts of the world. While carrying longswords is perfectly legal, it's considered old-fashioned. Smaller swords, including sword-canes are carried in certain parts of society (particularly where affairs are still settled with duels).

Church and State

It should be noted that there's no separation of Church and State in Britain or Europe. Elizabeth's parliament consists of the Variable Eight who dictate policy to the rest of the Church of Chaos. But according to William's edicts the House of Law must also be part of British policy-making.

Policy in the United States is a little different as the House of Representatives and the Senate that forms the United States Congress is designed to be separate from the Churches of Law and Chaos, though members will usually be affiliated to one of those bodies.



Gods and Monsters

Farewell, friend! I was a thousand times more evil than thou!

- Stormbringer

Contradictions are inevitable when combining two cosmologies. Somehow we need to reconcile the existence of both the Churches of Law and Chaos who meddle in the affairs of mortals and shape their destiny, and the Outer Gods and attendant monsters for whom mortals are irrelevant.

Gods and Politics

In Elizabeth's Empire there is virtually no separation of church and state. The Lords of Chaos are political positions; they are the Variable Eight Lords who are appointed by Elizabeth herself, and bear grandiose titles like Lord Arioch, Lord Slortar, etc. Whether actual gods or human pretenders they're clearly powerful entities but also in touch with the human population, and they hold a seat on Elizabeth's council for as long as it suits her whim.

The Variable Eight and the Church of Chaos also has local representation. In any major city the Gods are represented, and priests act as the mouthpiece for Arioch and the other gods when worshippers seek his council. Whether this is just a metaphor or the

ability to channel the mind of the actual Duke of Hell is up to you. Certainly there's a lot of ceremony involved, and while the priest is channeling Arioach they are assumed to be Arioach.

In the Young Kingdoms the representation of gods is even more corporation-like, with the various Dukes as CEO of each Church. Each competes with the other for the most devotion from the population; at the same time the population will worship whatever Lord is appropriate for the occasion, and will freely mix it up between Law and Chaos as well as the more primal deities. Religion is a free market.

Of course when the existence of gods is proven, and when they function as politicians and service providers, worshippers expect something in return.

Old and New Gods

Gods in the Elric's society feature in daily life, almost as if they were local personalities. They are clearly not the same as the Outer Gods, which are uncaring alien horrors with no interest in cultivating relationships with humans. So somehow we need to reconcile the Old Ones with the Churches of Law and Chaos. There are a couple of options:

One: Magicians, Not Gods

Those who call themselves the Lords of Law and Chaos are pretenders to godhood. They are more like the sons and daughters of Amber; they are allied to one of two cosmic forces, and they are fantastically powerful and are able to exist in multiple

versions of reality, possibly simultaneously. In this version, the Old Ones are like the Titans, a previous pantheon whose power has been partially usurped by the Churches, and for some reason exist outside normal space and time. It's in the interests of both Law and Chaos to avoid them finding their way back into our dimension.

Two: Gods and Shadows

The Lords of Law and Chaos have older, more alien aspects which exist simultaneously with their human-seeming avatars. "Law and Chaos" are a representation of primal forces, the "monstrous nuclear chaos beyond angled space". The Lords of Law and Chaos are honorific titles for humans in the Church hierarchy.

There may or may not be an absolute answer. What matters is the struggle between old and new ideologies. The one certainty is that the Churches think the older religions are a dangerous idea, and should be put down with prejudice.

Sanity and Monsters

What exactly triggers a SAN check?

If you can get your hands on the very old *Stormbringer* supplement *Demon Magic*, there are rules for witnessing and encountering horrible things and the toll they take on one's sanity. However I prefer a different approach.

Let's say all your magic is safe, licensed and packaged into Demons and Elementals and other recognisable forms by the Churches, etc. No matter how strange and frightening these forms are, they don't trigger SAN checks because they're commonplace, and explainable. They've been sanitised for mortal consumption (pardon the pun). More to the point Demons, and the Lords of Law and Chaos have picked forms that the human mind can comprehend without disintegrating.

But unlicensed magic — even innocuous magic like *Attract Fish* — lies outside that place. Maybe it's psychological. Maybe this raw magic is the equivalent of an unshielded radioactive source; like Crawford Tillinghast's machine it stimulates a vestigial sense organ, opening the mind to the wider universe.

I would suggest the following rules for SAN:

- demons and other recognisable magic do not cause SAN checks
- direct encounters with higher beings (such as summoning Beast Lords) could prompt a minor SAN check, with only a small loss. This check could be waived if the person had been in the presence of the being before (e.g. if they were a cultist)
- “unlicensed” and “raw magic” spells may prompt a minor SAN check, because of their radioactive effect
- encounters with the horrors from Call of Cthulhu have their listed effect.

The Mythos

You can't have *Call of Cthulhu* without the Cthulhu Mythos. But if Law and Chaos are everyday concepts, what place does the Mythos have?

The modern 20th Century has evolved from the wild and dark fairytale of Elric's time, but they have thousands of years between that time and the modern day. This means that:

1. Context has changed, and humans no longer have Aubec's perspective on the finite nature of Law and the vastness of Chaos
2. Law and Chaos are what the earthly priests tell the population they are
3. The society may be broadly secular with devotion to Law or Chaos being more of a business arrangement.

This gives a lot of latitude for gaps, misinformation, misattribution, apocrypha and heretical tracts. The Cthulhu Mythos skill (in this version, simply "Mythos") doesn't really change in interpretation from *Call of Cthulhu*, and points should be gained from the usual sources.

The main question is, what doesn't the Church want you to know?

Reconciling Science Fiction and Fantasy

Call of Cthulhu is more of a science fiction rather than fantasy genre, with alien races having explainable (if fantastic-sounding) origins on other planets, etc. This is at odds with the myth of Elric and doctrine of the Churches.

- Something supposedly happened around 2000 years ago, resulting in the world as it is today
- Both Law and Chaos employ “magic” which are gifts of their respective Churches, created by sanctioned methods...
- ...and they actively discredit the pursuit of “raw magic” that is outside their control.

What evidence is there for life or civilisation that pre-dates the sinking of R'lyeh, and how is it explained or contested? As previously noted the alt-1920s should be as close as possible to our own history and society, with the exception of religion. So you can assume there are archaeologists and geologists as well as theologians and historians; and when artifacts are found those that find them will seek explanations that suit them. The main change is the Melniboneans, who have shared the Earth with Humans for thousands of years — although since there have been no “pure” Melniboneans since Elric's time, evidence is open to speculation.



Game Notes

Here are the two games I ran in the alt-1920s.

The Mabelode Commission

The Mabelode Commission was set in Boston around 1923. The Commission exists to keep the peace between the human population and the Melnibonean gated community, and (secretly) to investigate breaches of the Old Ones (“Old Chaos”) into civilisation. As the name hints they are answerable to Mabelode directly.

Since this game is set in America (the Young Kingdoms) there was less emphasis on social class, and a stronger presence of Law. This game was mostly like an action police procedural — and with a bit of demon magic it was even possible to make various monsters survivable.

Dreaming Spires

Dreaming Spires is set in Oxford, formerly known as the Melnibonean colony Imyrr. Oxford is a place literally half within a dream world. I used both the *Dreamlands CoC* supplement and *Dream Realms* for Mongoose’s *Elric of Melnibone*.

This is a little more traditional with the party made up of academics, professionals and diletantes. With the constant flow of both academics and nobles into the city there's plenty of opportunity for the characters to interact with various strata of society. The longevity of the Melniboneans allows all sorts of historical characters into the campaign, and perhaps even act as the PCs' patrons. In addition there are options for explorations into the various corners of the earth. Finally, a seat of learning is a nice setting where PCs can plumb depths of forbidden knowledge, getting themselves into all kinds of trouble with the Church.



Systems

This section is a run-down of various Chaosium (and other) rules from a number of supplements.

Law and Chaos

It's not a Moorcock game without affiliations to Law and Chaos (and this is one place where the Mongoose *Eternal Champion* games really dropped the ball).

Stormbringer 1st through 4th editions used a system called Elan to track virtue with their own god. This was replaced in *Elric!* by an overall set of Allegiances to Chaos, Balance and Law. Both will work, but there are thematic differences:

- Elan is used for full-on divine intervention, i.e. the god manifesting and acting on behalf of the character
- Allegiance is lower-key, and the benefits are temporary boosts to Magic Points, Hit Points or Skill %. It does include a section on Apotheosis — becoming a Champion of Law, Chaos or the Balance.

Magic and Demons

The approach to Magic and Demons changes throughout Stormbringer editions:

- 1e through 3e has different kinds of demons (desire, combat, etc.), as well as Elemental and Beast Lord summoning
- 4e *Stormbringer* changes the Demon summoning rules and adds some rules for summoning Virtues a.k.a. Demons of Law
- *Elric!* massively changes the magic system, including BRP-like spells alongside summonings. Later supplements (*The Bronze Grimoire*, *The Unknown East*) further diversify the magic system.
- Darcsyde's *Corum* supplement includes new rules for Chaos magic called "Sorcerous Melds" but more importantly includes Law magic "Contrivances".
- Mongoose's *Elric of Melniboné* game has a diverse choice of magic, including summoning Demons, Elementals, and making Automata, as well as stealing Dreams.

The question is, how should this mesh with *Call of Cthulhu's* magic system? My approach was to assume that all "safe" magic came from summoning and appeals to higher powers, and that the isolated spells of *Call of Cthulhu* — particularly things that anyone could just write down and distribute — were inherently dangerous. Whether really dangerous or just labeled as such by the establishment, is up to you. In my games a lot of magic was

arbitrarily sanctioned and demons licensed (particularly in the Mabelode Commission).
Now, why would someone do that?

Agencies and Cults

The Stormbringer/Elric! RPGs mention the ability of PCs to become Agents of deities. In *Stormbringer* Agents are placed above priests and have literally promised their soul to the deity, with benefits of Elan and Divine Intervention. This gets watered down a bit in *Elric!* where Agents are just on the payroll and get financial reward for doing the work of Law/Chaos; however that system also includes systems for Invocation of deities (which is easier if one is a Champion of Law/Chaos/Balance).

The fun part of having Agents are the associated spy games:

- Agents should have handlers to put them in touch with command
- They should be given missions
- There should be a reward for fulfilling them, and disincentives for refusing
- Agents should be known by some indelible mark.

Suitable rewards for serving could include money and status (a contextual boost to Credit Rating similar to the benefits of being high born), spells/demons/magic items, even divine intervention and other powers. *Elric!* has a nice section on benefits of being

a Champion, though the epic scale may not quite fit with the low-key nature of an investigative game. Mongoose's *Cults of the Young Kingdoms* has a long list of gifts and compulsions, though I don't care for the "taint of chaos" effect (a bit too Warhammer FRP).

Power Levels

Assuming you're using both Stormbringer and CoC rules "straight", once demon weapons and armour become commonplace, dispatching Lovecraftian monsters becomes a distinct possibility. Demon melee weapons can easily exceed the damage of a shotgun at point-blank range. This has two effects:

1. Characters are more likely to go mad than die
2. Violence becomes an option.

To put things in perspective, a fairly low-level demon weapon may add 5d6 damage, so a single blow could do more than 20 points. That's enough to do for a Hound of Tindalos with a lucky roll, and a few blows will start to annoy Shoggoths and Star Spawn.

The early Stormbringer does have a problem with balance between PCs (i.e. there was no balance), but this is mainly thanks to the lottery that is character generation. If the players are working for an Agency that bequeathes them magical (demonic) items, power levels should be easy to control. In any case Demons should be rare and demon weapons rarer still.

Sourcebooks and Adventures

The more complex campaigns may require some thought to weave the Moorcockian motifs into the setting, but a lot of printed CoC adventures are fairly neutral in their premise and should be easy to wind into the plot. There's not much to say about this other than the printed adventures from Chaosium and in particular CoC are high quality with handouts galore.

A lot of the CoC adventures will assume a mixture of professions and will concentrate on technical skills like Psychology, Archaeology and Library Use. These skills, and the professions in CoC should still be relevant in the alternate 1920s. With the exception of various Allegiances and the chance to learn Sorcery, things shouldn't be that different.