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Crossing Genres, Crossing Media: The Cthulhu Mythos Through the Ages

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Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937), or HPL for short, was an American writer, critic and essayist who remained largely unknown to the masses during his short lifetime, living in the shadows of celebrated authors such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The lack of recognition was due to Lovecraft's own refusal to write anything else than weird fiction: a genre in its infancy that emerged at the end of the 19th century (VanderMeer and VanderMeer 2012). Lovecraft left to the world his short tales and a vision of a philosophy that would become essential not only to science fiction, but also to other genres and to pop culture in general. However, Lovecraft's most influential legacy is without a doubt the Cthulhu Mythos and Lovecraftian horror.

Now, what exactly do we mean when we talk about the Cthulhu Mythos? Taking its name from HPL's most famous extraterrestrial monster-God Cthulhu, the Mythos is commonly defined by scholars such as S. T. Joshi as an amalgamation of elements, characters, settings and themes found within the works of H. P. Lovecraft and his weird fiction contemporaries. Coined by August Derleth (Tierney 1972), HPL's publisher, the Cthulhu Mythos has become an ever-expanding ground for story crafting in all forms and formats, be it novels, films, comic books, or video games.

Officially coming into existence with the short story "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928), the Mythos was at that point only at the beginning of its journey towards its full cosmic potential. During its formative period, which coincided with the later part of Lovecraft's active publishing career, the Mythos became a complex web of interconnected writings with a given set of universal rules stemming from Lovecraft's nihilistic philosophy. For this very reason, the Cthulhu Mythos is often associated with Lovecraftian horror as they both share the important elements of existential dread, cosmic insignificance and the inevitable demise of the unreliable narrator (Joshi 2013, chap. 17). Nonetheless, it is important to note that due to the fact the Mythos has experienced its most substantial growth since Lovecraft's death, the two terms are not interchangeable and evoke different expectations. Lovecraftian horror is more tied to the author's own writing and is considered an expression of his cosmicism. The Cthulhu Mythos, on the

other hand, suggests the presence of Lovecraft's Pantheon, landscapes, grimoires, and characters but does not necessarily need to include cosmicism (Joshi 2013, chap. 17).

The Mythos started as an exchange of ideas between a handful of like-minded authors, with Lovecraft at the center. It gradually expanded and branched out, becoming largely independent from the original "core" as it encompassed more and more entries and works (Joshi 2015, 203–45). This is the phase where tracing the evolution of such a large, shared body of work becomes important. Renowned Lovecraftian scholars such as S. T. Joshi (*The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos*, 2015) and Robert M. Price (*H. P. Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos*, 1990) identified specific stages and marked cornerstones that clearly changed the direction in which the Mythos was heading. Next to scholarly publications on the subject matter, fan-based categorizations started appearing, especially in the last two decades, during which online domains dedicated to specific authors or mythoi have become increasingly popular.

The Cthulhu Mythos has been through various categorizations over the decades, including August Derleth's and Lin Carter's early attempts, as well as later scholarly ones such as S. T. Joshi's *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2015). This article focuses on three distinct stages: The Cthulhu Mythos Proper as identified by R. M. Price, The Derleth Mythos coined by R. L. Tierney, and the Third Stage-Carter Mythos (Price 1985, 3–11) (see Figure 1). It intends to extensively analyze each step in the evolution of the Cthulhu Mythos using information provided by scholars and certain fandom domains. While some may oppose the latter as unsubstantiated, the author believes that the non-scholarly community of dedicated fans can sometimes offer insights a well-established scholar may have overlooked. However, the primary focus will be on scholarly material with occasional insertions from the latter. The main goal is to map the various changes that inevitably happened to the Mythos and compare their value with the core idea presented by H. P. Lovecraft.

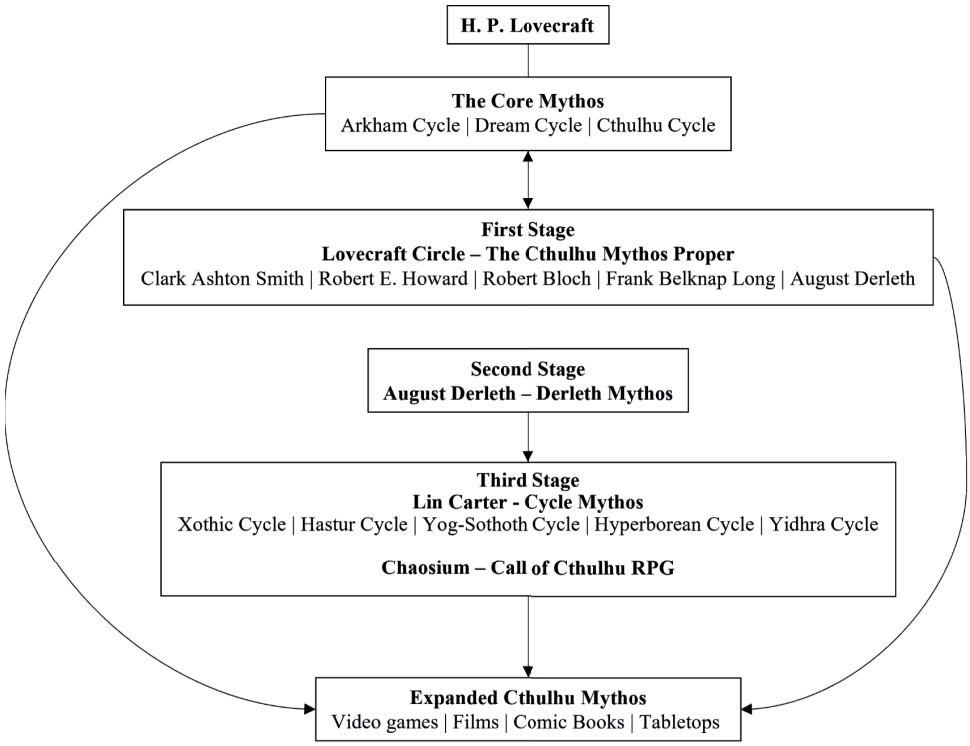

Figure 1. The evolution of the Cthulhu Mythos.

Simultaneously, the article will attempt to show that even though the origins of the Mythos began within the confines of weird fiction and pulp magazines, it has long since outgrown its intended sub-genre and managed to enter into every part of pop culture, effectively appearing in one way or another in all the available media of our contemporary world. How exactly does the Mythos present itself in fantasy? What is its legacy in science fiction? Where should the Mythos be sought in popular culture? These and perhaps some others are the questions this article intends to answer.

1. The Core – Origins

If one wishes to fully comprehend the magnitude of the Cthulhu Mythos's influence on contemporary culture, it is necessary to return to where it all started; to Howard Phillips Lovecraft, and to his philosophy, writing, and beliefs. This chapter therefore deals with the complexities of Lovecraft's stories – the elements, themes, landscapes, characters, and tropes and what role they play in the Mythos and its creation. Simultaneously, it is of great importance to remember that the actual name "Cthulhu Mythos" was coined

by August Derleth after H. P. Lovecraft's death; to Lovecraft himself the mythos was a series of plot devices that conveyed his philosophy (Joshi 2013, chap. 17).

The Cthulhu Mythos was born with the publication of H. P. Lovecraft's seminal short story "The Call of Cthulhu," first published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in February 1928. Often considered the author's best piece of writing, it presents the greatest structural complexity of any of Lovecraft's tales written up to that point (Joshi 2013, chap. 17). "The Call of Cthulhu" not only introduced the famous dead but dreaming Cthulhu, but also truly showcased the philosophy of cosmicism through human insignificance and the inability to avoid or change one's fate. The premise of the story also indicates that no matter what the narrator intends to do, he cannot stop the inevitable. In Lovecraftian horror, there is no escape, no happy ending, only insanity and death.

Cosmic horror is a key theme of the original Mythos, and is based on the insignificance of humanity and the unknowable nature of the universe. It is an amalgamation of nihilism, fatalism and the author's own atheistic worldview. Lovecraft explained that the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest fear is that of the unknown (Lovecraft 2020, 423). Cosmic horror uses this fact to its advantage and induces fear by presenting things the human mind is unable to process. Simply put, cosmic horror holds on to the idea that what humans consider reality is merely the tip of an iceberg. Below lies a truth so alien that any attempt to comprehend it causes insanity. The subgenre is also often characterized by the idea that human existence is wholly insignificant and humans are powerless when faced with entities from the deep cosmos (Richard 2023).

This opens the second main element of the Cthulhu Mythos – the Cosmic Pantheon. Although established in 1928, Lovecraft was working on the Pantheon long before August Derleth's establishment of the Cthulhu Mythos. The majority of his stories feature beings out of space that shocked readers with their grotesque, morbid appearance. Some do not have physical bodies, others are able to shapeshift, all of them are universally agender, and none of them understand the concept of good and evil. Lovecraft divided his Pantheon into Other Gods residing in deep space, Great Old Ones that once presided over the Earth as rulers but now are dead but dreaming, and Great Ones located in the Dreamlands. These alien deities present a complex ancestry that became increasingly difficult to keep track of, especially in the later stages of the mythos. Figure 2 below shows the early genealogy draft shared by Lovecraft in his letter to James F. Morton in April 27, 1933, with the addition of Dagon and Hydra, which play an important role in the novella *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1936).

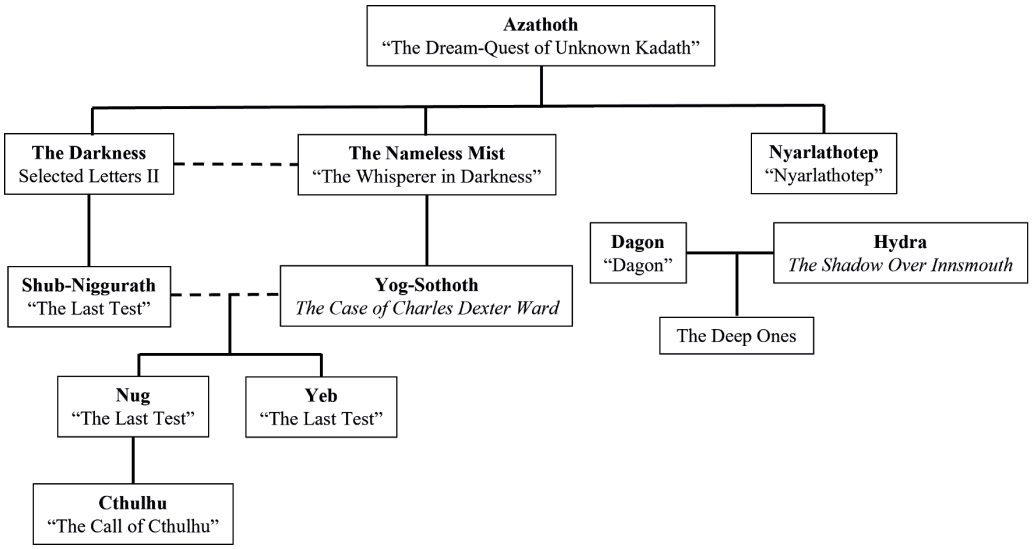

Figure 2. Genealogy chart.

It goes without saying that the Pantheon is an essential part of the Mythos, not only character-wise but also in terms of what these extraterrestrial beings represent. Ultimately, what Lovecraft created was an anti-mythology, something that resembles myths in its language and structure, but is completely devoid of any of the etiological and eschatological significance that typically characterizes them (Münchow 2017, 48). Nonetheless, HPL's artificial Pantheon still followed a genealogy similar to other pantheons known to mankind, such as the Scandinavian or Greek. Thus, Azathoth was described by Lovecraft in the short story "The Other Gods" as the primary deity of the Pantheon, similarly to Zeus, Odin or Perun.

Lovecraft's mythology, inspired by Lord Dunsany's mythos, brought another important element that quickly became associated with the Cthulhu Mythos – the cynical atheism and ethical nihilism. Though raised in a Catholic environment, Lovecraft soon abandoned these beliefs, studying other religions but ultimately settling for atheism and the power of scientific explanation. Therefore, his presentation of "gods" in all his tales is essentially a mockery of faith, because the worshipped targets are nowhere near the Christian idea of godhood, but rather extraterrestrial entities that came from the stars (Lovecraft 2006a, 145–48). Meanwhile, the ethical nihilism, defined as a rejection of the possibility of absolute moral or ethical values, is best explained by Lovecraft's letter to Farnsworth Wright from July 5, 1927:

> Now all my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form – and the local human passions and conditions and standards – are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all.
>
> (Lovecraft 1968, 149)

Ethical nihilists believe that good and evil are nebulous, and values addressing such are the product of nothing more than social and emotive pressures. The "rule" of absence of good and evil easily fit into the unwritten set of laws of the Cthulhu Mythos that were followed for as long as Lovecraft was alive.

The incorporation of other elements and themes – such as various fantastical landscapes and a fictious New England topography, the unreliable narrator, mystical occult tomes and artifacts, cults, psychological horror, and so on – into the Cthulhu Mythos came naturally as they were already used not only by HPL but likewise by his contemporary weird fiction authors. While these factors might be less significant than those previously discussed, they are still inherently Lovecraftian, and are commonly associated not only with the Mythos but with the entire sub-genre of Lovecraftian fiction/horror.

Lovecraft honed his craft for the entirety of his life, and as such it is possible to trace slight changes in his stories, especially when one compares the early works (1905–1920) with those published after 1925. Certainly, the cosmic horror elements are much more profound in the later period, formulating the basic rules present in the Cthulhu Mythos. This natural artistic evolution of worldbuilding and myth-crafting caused certain scholars (Derleth, Price) to categorize HPL's stories, labeling only those published after 1925 as "Cthulhu Mythos" tales and pushing the rest into other convenient groups (the Dunsanian cycle, the Arkham cycle, the Macabre, etc.). However, as S. T. Joshi (2013) stated, "it is purely for convenience, with a full knowledge that Lovecraft's work is not to be grouped arbitrarily, rigidly, or exclusively into discrete categories" (Joshi 2013, chap. 17). Lovecraft himself also maintained that all his tales emphasize cosmicism in some form or another, and that they are interconnected, meaning that grouping certain stories together while excluding others because they do not fit the "theme" would disturb the larger picture that is cosmicism (Lovecraft 2006b, 207–11). Even if one wanted to embrace those arbitrary categories, there would still be visible connections between the sub-divisions – for example Azathoth and Nyarlatho-

tep are featured in "The Dreams in the Witch-House" (1933) from the Arkham cycle, as well as in their native Dream/Dunsanian cycle *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1943) that also mentions Arkham and so on.

Weird fiction was where H. P. Lovecraft found his place as a writer, declaring that "any literary merit I have is confined to tales of dream-life, strange shadow, and cosmic 'outsideness'" (Lovecraft 2006b, 210). Lovecraft was an imaginative artist, following in the footsteps of the great writers he admired (Poe, Blake, Dunsany), while fully aware of how undervalued they were in comparison to their contemporary peers. In other words, he did not expect fame, and wrote for the sake of writing (Lovecraft 2006b, 210).

2. The Lovecraft Circle – The Cthulhu Mythos Proper

In his essay "H. P. Lovecraft and the Cthulhu Mythos" Robert M. Price identified the developmental stages of the Mythos. The first stage, which Price named "The Cthulhu Mythos Proper," took shape during Lovecraft's lifetime and was subject to his guidance. The second stage occurred after Lovecraft's death and was largely the work of August Derleth, who attempted to expand and categorize the Mythos (Price 1985). The term "Derleth Mythos" was later applied by Richard L. Tierney to distinguish between them, for reasons that shall be discussed later (Tierney 1972).

The Lovecraft Circle played an irreplaceable role in the further evolution of the Cthulhu Mythos. They were all weird fiction authors connected by passion for the craft (Lovecraft Fandom 2025c). Lovecraft was a prolific letter writer and corresponded with each of these writers actively, exchanging ideas for stories, borrowing story elements, and inventing grimoires, texts and extraterrestrial gods. Their stories composed the rest of the "core" of the Mythos Proper as they were written by Lovecraft's contemporaries, either co-authored with him or under his supervision and in concordance with Lovecraft's vision. A large portion of the short tales were written before HPL's death in 1937, and as such are generally regarded as "accepted" by Lovecraft. The primary Circle authors and their direct contribution, based on the correspondence between them and Lovecraft in *Selected Letters I–V*, are: Robert Bloch (12 short stories), Clark Ashton Smith (8 short stories), Robert E. Howard (7 short stories), Frank Belknap Long (2 short stories, 1 novel) and August Derleth (34 short stories, 1 novel) (Lovecraft Fandom 2025c).

Lovecraft's correspondence with other members of the Circle reveals an interesting pattern: while Lovecraft often wrote seriously, lamenting how misunderstood imaginative writers were or giving advice to his fellows, there were other instances of

playfulness in his letters that are very similar to role-playing. An example from a letter addressed to Willis Conover in 1936 might help to illustrate the role-playing aspect:

> Has Yog-Sothoth a pedigree? No. He always existed. Since he has no parents, I've never met 'em. He isn't housebroken, so I generally try to chain him outside. When he sends forth a pseudopodic tentacle (which can pass through the most solid walls) and begins to grope around inside the house, I usually call his attention to something going on in another galaxy – just to get his mind off local things. Yog doesn't always have long, ropy arms, since he assumes a variety of shapes – solid, liquid, and gaseous – at will. Possibly, though, he's fondest of the form which does have 'em. I've never encouraged him to scratch my back, since those whom Yog-Sothoth touches are never seen again.
>
> (Lovecraft 1976b, 303)

As had been shown above, letter-writing played a large role in the expansion of the Mythos. Lovecraft did not in any way monopolize his creations; on the contrary, he lent them to the other authors freely (Lovecraft Fandom 2025c). He recognized that each writer had their story-cycle and that an element from one cycle would not necessarily become an integral part of another simply because it was used in a story. Therefore, when Clark Ashton Smith mentioned "Kthulhut" (Cthulhu) or Iog-Sotôt (Yog-Sothoth) in one of his Hyperborean tales, it did not necessarily mean Cthulhu became part of the entire Hyperborean cycle (Price 1985).

Some cases were just borrowings of names or places that did not mean the story was a part of the Mythos, whereas in other situations, deities and characters of other Circle authors had been connected to the Mythos through several stories and other means of explanations (genealogy, for example). This was the case with Tsathoggua, an entity created by Smith that Lovecraft mentioned in no less than ten stories, starting with *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1931). In his revision of Zealia Bishop's *The Mound* (1940), Lovecraft tied Smith's creation to his own story-cycle by placing Tsathoggua alongside entities such as Yig, Shub-Niggurath and Nug and Yeb in subterranean K'n-yan, a realm located under the state of Oklahoma (Price 1985). Depicted as a vast underground nation under a "sky" of glowing blue clouds similar to the Aurora Borealis, it is occupied by a hidden race of prehistoric humanoids (Lovecraft 1940, chapters IV–V). Lovecraft mentioned this realm in other stories such as *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1931) and "Out of the Aeons" (1935).

The primary authors of the Circle not only crossed their story cycles and deities, they also deliberately created elements to be included in the Mythos, the most notable

example being the various arcane grimoires of forbidden lore. This worked in a similar way as with the inclusion of other deities into the Pantheon. Robert E. Howard used *Necronomicon* in "The Children of the Night" (1930) and Lovecraft in turn mentioned Howard's *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* in both "Out of the Aeons" and *The Shadow Out of Time* (1936). Interestingly enough, Howard's original, unedited Conan the Barbarian stories are part of the Cthulhu Mythos, for he frequently corresponded with Lovecraft and the two would sometimes insert references or elements of each other's settings in their works. Later editors reworked many of the original Conan stories, diluting this connection.

To conclude this chapter, the primary figures in the Lovecraft Circle contributed to the Mythos in the same way Lovecraft had, following Lovecraft's vision but presenting it in their own unique style. However, it is still important to remember that the authors perceived the Mythos as an elaborate inside joke between colleagues, especially as Lovecraft was getting closer to his death (Lovecraft 1965; 1968; 1971; 1976a-b). Once again, returning to S. T. Joshi's analysis, Lovecraft most likely did not see the Mythos as the centerpiece but as a background element, similarly to his pseudo-mythology (Joshi 2013, chap. 17).

3. The Derleth Mythos

August Derleth (1909–1971), H. P. Lovecraft's publisher, founder of Arkham House Publishing and member of the Lovecraft Circle, was the central figure in the second stage of the Mythos development. Richard L. Tierney was the first to call the second stage of the Mythos the "Derleth Mythos" in his essay "The Derleth Mythos" (1972). Criticizing Derleth's attempt to systematize Lovecraft's "core" and concepts, he believed Lovecraft's outlook on the supernatural and the cosmos had been dynamic – constantly changing and developing throughout his life. Meanwhile, Derleth's attitude was largely static; he appreciated his mentor's concepts but cared less for developing them (Tierney 1972).

> I grant Derleth the right to his view of the cosmos, but the sad thing is that he has made all too many believe that his view is that of Lovecraft also. This is simply not true. Lovecraft's picture of the universe and Derleth's are completely dissimilar.
>
> (Tierney 1972)

After Lovecraft lost his battle with cancer in 1937, Derleth took it upon himself to "maintain" the Mythos. Derleth changed the Cthulhu Mythos from a mere background

element into a cohesive and organized system to a far greater extent than Lovecraft or any other author had done before. That in itself could not be considered a bad decision – Derleth wanted to keep the weird cosmic fiction alive, after all. It is chiefly the path he chose for this ambitious expansion of the Mythos, and the subsequent changes he made, that are currently accepted only by some and despised by others, foremost among them S. T. Joshi, as can be gauged from *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos*. Nonetheless, it happened as part of the natural evolution of the Mythos and as such should not be forgotten or omitted.

Before we dive into the confusion that must have been the second stage, let us briefly outline who August Derleth was. Derleth was a writer for *Weird Tales* whom Lovecraft mentored and inspired. When Lovecraft passed away, Derleth worked with R. H. Barlow, Lovecraft's literary executive, and gained permission from Lovecraft's aunt to republish Lovecraft's work. After the aunt also passed away, Derleth froze Barlow out and monopolized all the Lovecraft rights. Derleth also wrote "collaborations," which meant he used Lovecraft's name for his own stories (Phipps 2024).

Derleth intended to change the entire perception of the Mythos at the time: instead of a background element, he turned it into the focal point. He started rigorously cross-referencing Lovecraft's tales in an attempt to create a large, singular story-cycle that would be the central pillar for the Cthulhu Mythos. It was an interesting decision considering it was also Derleth who first suggested the categorization of Lovecraft's fiction into "Cthulhu Mythos tales," "Dunsanian tales," and "New England tales" (Joshi 2013, chap. 17).

Furthermore, he ignored the individuality Lovecraft recognized in the stories of his fellow writers (or even his predecessors): if Lovecraft referenced a name from another author, that justified including the other author's story-cycle into the Cthulhu Mythos. Using the same example as in the previous chapter, Derleth would assume that, because Clark Ashton Smith used a slightly different spelling of "Cthulhu", it was only rational to consider his Hyperborean cycle part of the Mythos.

Derleth's decision to bring the good and evil dichotomy into the Mythos, and in the process to Christianize it, clashed with the elements and philosophy of HPL's stories. Derleth was a Catholic, and as such he did not exactly follow the nihilistic philosophy of Lovecraft and the immediate Circle, nor the atheistic, science-driven settings and the idea of non-anthropocentric universe (Tierney 1972). Derleth created the Elder Gods, good entities that were supposed to help humanity fight against the evil Old Ones, a parallel of the "Christian Mythos," with the bad against good, and humanity the focal point of it all (Tierney 1972). Because Elder Gods in the Mythos were Derleth's invention, he also created new entities himself, or assigned to this role characters with no

previous association to the cosmic Pantheon, such as Nodens from Lovecraft's Dream Cycle. On the other hand, the Old Ones were an amalgamation of the Great Old Ones such as Cthulhu, the Old Ones from *The Dunwich Horror* (1929) and the Other Gods from the Dreamlands. In this case, Derleth simply assumed they were all the same, which Lovecraft never claimed.

Alongside Derleth's firm decision to adjust the Cthulhu Mythos to the Christian and Medieval tradition, he also created an elemental system, borrowed from the ancient theory that all things known to us are compounded of four elements: fire, water, earth, and air (Tierney 1972). Even here, Derleth contradicted himself; he made Cthulhu and his minions water beings, yet "The Call of Cthulhu" has them coming from space and building their cities on a landmass – most likely the legendary Atlantis – that is later submerged by a geological upheaval, trapping Cthulhu in R'yleh (Lovecraft 2014). Yog-Sothoth (*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, "The Dunwich Horror") and Nyarlathotep ("Nyarlathotep," "The Rats in the Walls") were associated with Earth, even though both existed outside the solar system. Hastur and Ithaqua were placed under Air, although Hastur supposedly lives at the bottom of the lake of Hali. The elemental association made sense perhaps only with Ithaqua, Derleth's own creation, as suggested by the title of their "debut" short story "The Thing That Walked on the Wind."

Aside from creating good deities and turning those who were impassive into something truly evil, Derleth also added certain beings into the Pantheon, once again on the basis of a simple reference. Hastur became a Great Old One represented as an avatar by the *King in Yellow* of Robert W. Chambers, because of a passing reference that linked Hastur and the Yellow Sign in *The Whisperer in Darkness*. Derleth also gave more meaning to the servitor races and codified them as an important aspect of the artificial mythology and hence the Mythos itself. Servitor races were present in the earlier works, primarily used by Lovecraft and Frank Belknap Long who, however, did not think them a major aspect of the shared universe, as stated in their letters.

What August Derleth achieved was indeed an immense growth of the Mythos – every passing reference, any story that mentioned a Mythos element, Lovecraft's numerous passing or friendly mentions of other Circle members' creations became part of the Cthulhu Mythos. What it gained in volume it lost in conciseness and core values. It was still weird fiction at its core, with all the stories Derleth was adding, but it stopped being the fiction people now associate with the Cthulhu Mythos. To be fair to August Derleth, he built a somewhat coherent mythology from disparate sources and shared the works of a writer he genuinely admired. As such, he inspired other younger authors just as Lovecraft had wanted to. Fans of Derleth often also argue that without Derleth, Lovecraft would have been completely forgotten.

4. Third Stage - The Lin-Cycle Mythos and RPG

The third stage of the Cthulhu Mythos followed what had been set in motion by Derleth. The most influential authors of this period that greatly contributed to the expansion were Lin Carter, Colin Wilson, and Brian Lumley, while scholars like Richard L. Tierney, David E. Schultz and Robert M. Price focused on literary criticism and academic aspects concerning the Mythos. It was also at this stage the Cthulhu Mythos began more actively branching out into film and tabletop games.

Lin Carter (1930–1988) was another influential figure who, like Derleth, not only contributed to but also rearranged the Cthulhu Mythos. A writer himself, Carter combined fantasy, science fiction and weird fiction simultaneously, producing various stories about Conan. His most influential works were studies of the modern literary fantasy genre *Tolkien: A Look Behind "The Lord of the Rings"* (1969), *Lovecraft: A Look Behind the "Cthulhu Mythos"* (1972), and *Imaginary Worlds: the Art of Fantasy* (1973). Being an editor of the *Ballantine Adult Fantasy* series alongside his publications established Carter as an authority of the fantasy genre.

Carter's goal regarding the Cthulhu Mythos was ambitious to say the least, as he intended to codify it as much as possible, something essentially unachievable given the amount of lore that had already been added by Derleth. On top of that, Carter's own attempts introduced more gods, books, and places that were interlinked. However, he was influential in setting out detailed lists of gods, their ancestry, and their servitor races through his Mythos tales, simultaneously reworking Derleth's elemental system.

Understanding that the size of the Mythos had reached a point where individual authors could not possibly familiarize themselves with all elements, Carter solidified the idea of cycles; something that had already been present within the Mythos but left unfinished. The primary idea was that the cycles, like real legends and myths, would be elaborated upon and rewritten with varying details. This would explain the Mythos as a series of interconnecting cycles that sometimes conflict with one another. Therefore, Carter's Xothic cycle, a series of short stories based on "The Call of Cthulhu" and "Out of the Aeons," can be viewed as another version or retelling of those stories. On the other hand, the Hyperborean cycle consists of Clark Ashton Smith's stories that can be interpreted as an extension of the Cthulhu Mythos. Carter's cycles offered a loophole for future authors in the sense they do not have to familiarize themselves with the entirety of the Mythos but can choose a myth-cycle instead.

Brian Lumley (1937–2024), a British contributor to the Cthulhu Mythos, invented a large number of new Great Old Ones and Elder Gods, following Derleth's Mythos and abiding by his good versus evil dichotomy. He also added new locations and fictional grimoires that could be shared within the universe. Lumley's first entry to the

Mythos happened after he had corresponded with Derleth, who selected "Cement Surroundings" and "The Sister City" for the anthology *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* (1969). Lumley contributed to the Mythos with a multitude of stories, notably about his detective character Titus Crow, who was featured in numerous tales and several novels, such as *The Burrowers Beneath* (1974), *The Transition of Titus Crow* (1975), and *The Compleat Crow* (1987). Crow was portrayed as a persistent nemesis to the Xothic (or Cthulhu) Cycle deities, particularly to Ithaqua. Another significant cycle of Lumley's takes place in Lovecraft's Dreamland, for example "Dylath-Leen" (1970) and *Hero of Dreams* (1986). The last notable cycle happens in the Primal Lands known as Theem'hdra and includes several series of short tales that were later published in a volume called *The House of Cthulhu: Tales of the Primal Land* (1984).

Another British author, Colin Wilson (1931–2013), was not as infatuated with H. P. Lovecraft as Carter, Derleth or Lumley. He dedicated two chapters to Lovecraft in his *The Strength to Dream: Literature and the Imagination* (1962) and neither of them were exactly flattering, while offering little literary criticism or any objective remarks. If anything, his chapters on Lovecraft seemed like a personal vendetta towards a man long dead.

> In some ways, Lovecraft is a horrifying figure. In his 'war with rationality', he brings to mind W. B. Yeats. But, unlike Yeats, he is sick, and his closest relation is with Peter Kürten, the Düsseldorf murderer, who admitted that his days in solitary confinement were spent conjuring up sexual-sadistic fantasies. Lovecraft is totally withdrawn; he has rejected 'reality'; he seems to have lost all sense of health that would make a normal man turn back halfway.
>
> (Wilson 1962, 25)

In the wake of such harsh criticism, Wilson was challenged by August Derleth to show whether he could write better than Lovecraft. As a response, Wilson produced *The Mind Parasites* (1967), in which humanity is bedeviled by creatures called Tsathogguans. Later, he turned Derleth's Lloigor into an alien species of psychic vampires whose depiction influenced subsequent writers, including graphic artists Alan Moore and Grant Morrison (Lovecraft Fandom 2025a). In comparison to previous Mythos writers, Wilson's stories were more overtly sexual and explicitly violent.

A perhaps surprising influence – but of great significance for 21st-century developments – was the roleplaying tabletop game *Call of Cthulhu*, chiefly created by Sandy Petersen and published in 1981 by Chaosium. Petersen merged heroic fantasy with weird fiction and cosmic horror by combining a fantasy RPG where the player decides their character's fate via rolling a specifically modified dice with Lovecraft's unique

– and versatile – Mythos. The horrors presented in all the stages of the Mythos are obscure enough to pass, at least at first glance, for science fiction and fantasy. Dragons are a common occurrence, so why not an entity made of mist, or a dead but dreaming God at the bottom of the ocean? That is how Petersen felt when he designed and wrote the rules for *Call of Cthulhu*.

However, Petersen's influence did not stop there. Most tabletop games come with roleplaying manuals that guide the players through the story. These additions can be combined or added to the "core" manual depending on what the dungeon master has in mind for the next adventure session. *Sandy Petersen, therefore, wrote Sandy Petersen's Cthulhu Mythos: The Ultimate Guide to the Cthulhu Mythos in Roleplaying* (2017), which can be used for the tabletop RPGs *Pathfinder*, *Dark Eye* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. This massive, beautifully illustrated volume brings in playable character sheets, rules for Insanity and Dreams, new spells and rituals, mythos items and artifacts, cults, and four player races from Lovecraft's universe: Dreamlands Cats, Ghouls, Gnorri, and Zoogs.

> The fact is that Lovecraft's monsters aren't just monsters. They have *personalities*. And as such, you can use them for much more than just bags of hit points. Most obviously, they need not always be treated as enemies. Yes, these monsters can be malign, cannibalistic horrors, but they are most often intelligent horrors who are able to understand and sometimes communicate with humans. They have purposes.
>
> (Petersen 2017, 4)

As can be gauged from the paragraph above, Petersen used more of a Derlethian approach for his gaming manual. Lovecraft most likely did not think so deeply about his deities, although his playful mentions of the Pantheon in his letters may suggest otherwise. Petersen's material was written in a more terse, clinical way so it would fit the needs of the game. It mostly included descriptions and functions of the monsters, deities, characters and other gaming assets.

The influence of the tabletop game was immense, as it ultimately opened the door to video gaming, arguably the main driving force that keeps the Cthulhu Mythos alive today and effectively spreads it across genres like a cosmic plague.

5. Legacy of the Mythos, Genre Crossing and Cultural Impact

The development of the Mythos as such ended with the previous chapter. S. T. Joshi published *The Rise and Fall of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2008), in which he discussed the

spreading phenomenon at length. He later edited, extended and re-published the volume under the title *The Rise, Fall, and Rise of the Cthulhu Mythos* (2015). Joshi's understanding of the evolution of the Mythos is straightforward: it emerged, it expanded under Lovecraft's peers and scions, then it was ruined by Derleth, followed by a chaotic stage until the Mythos settled at last (Joshi 2015, 203–45).

The status of the Cthulhu Mythos – what is considered "canon" and what not – is perilous at best. There is a large disagreement about the Derleth Mythos and even the third stage. What everyone seems to agree upon is that Lovecraft's stories are the core of the Mythos and that Derleth's involvement and vigorous publishing efforts helped establish Lovecraft as an influential figure in contemporary horror and literary fiction. A casual consumer of popular entertainment might not even realize the cosmic horror that surrounds them. The Cthulhu Mythos began spreading into other genres at some point during the second stage, invading science fiction, fantasy, horror and so forth. As has been previously established, some artistic creations utilized Lovecraftian horror over the actual Mythos, choosing Lovecraft's ideology rather than his creations. Those pieces of work do not necessarily fall into the Cthulhu Mythos.

Science fiction, to no one's surprise, easily absorbed the Mythos, having no problems integrating extraterrestrial beings and nihilistic philosophy into the genre. Pieces such as *Area X: The Southern Reach* trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer, Stephen King's *The Mist* (1980), and John W. Campbell's *Who Goes There?/Frozen Hell* (1938, 2019) are great examples in literature, among many others. In film (and the subsequent novels and novelizations by various authors) one may note, for instance, that Ridley Scott's *Alien* franchise adapted humanity's insignificance and fragility into its lore. The Xenomorphs do not distinguish between good and evil, but are controlled by their instincts, despite showing a capacity to learn and a certain level of intelligence. Furthermore, the aliens' design was made by H. R. Giger, who was heavily inspired by Lovecraft, as can be also seen in his compendium *Giger's Necronomicon* (1977). John Carpenter's style brought Lovecraft's philosophy to the screen through pieces such as *The Thing* (1982), *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994), and *The Fog* (1980). Clive Baker's stories and films, especially his *Hellraiser* (1987) are, too, considered an extended part of the Mythos, while simultaneously working with Lovecraftian horror.

The genre of fantasy has begun integrating elements of the Cthulhu Mythos much more slowly than science fiction and horror. Although both fantasy and weird fiction belong to speculative fiction, they present different elements and settings. Fantasy is defined as a genre of literature that features magical and supernatural elements absent from the real world (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025). Many fantasy authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien and G. R. R. Martin created entirely imaginary universes with their

own physical laws, logic, races and creatures. In comparison, weird fiction usually juxtaposes fantastical elements with the real world. To simplify, while both genres have many features in common, one does not expect to find an elf in a weird tale, or a cosmic being in any of the fantasy sub-genres. The best examples of fantasy narratives influenced by cosmic horror can be found in video games, as well as their novelizations and lore. *World of Warcraft* (2005–) and the *Elder Scrolls* series (1994–) both feature a plethora of references to the Cthulhu Mythos; they furthermore incorporated cosmic deities into their fantasy lore, while basing large portions of lore around their influence on the various races present within their respective universes.

Sandy Petersen's guidebooks for the tabletop games are mainly in the fantasy genre, as has been established in the previous chapter. Guillermo del Torro worked with the Cthulhu Mythos when creating his *Hellboy* films: the first movie starts with a quote from De Vermis Mysteriis, a fictional grimoire created by Robert Bloch that debuted in "The Secret in the Tomb." The Golden Army mentions Bethmoora and features a pair of Elder Things in a brief background appearance. Similarly, the short television series *Guillermo del Torro's Cabinet of Curiosities* featured three adaptations directly related to the Cthulhu Mythos.

Stephen King once said, "I think it is beyond doubt that H. P. Lovecraft has yet to be surpassed as the twentieth century's greatest practitioner of the classic horror tale" (Wohleber 1995). Lovecraft's stories and philosophy, his "core," and even the Mythos itself undoubtedly shaped the evolution of horror in the 20th and 21st centuries. It is obvious humans enjoy feeling fear in a controlled environment; Lovecraft's understanding of fear and its usage in his tales gave further generations of horror writers and creators something versatile to work with. An entirely separate article would be needed to truly dissect the impact Lovecraft has had on horror, so for now, let us focus on how it affected popular culture, primarily comics and video games.

Lovecraftian horror and the Cthulhu Mythos were also impactful in the narratives and worldbuilding of comics. Characters and deities appeared in the works of other artists as homages to Lovecraft or for their horror aspect. Places and the infamous *Necronomicon* were used in many issues of comic books. Adaptations of the works of the Mythos are constantly being published, with individual artists using their vivid imaginations as they set Lovecraft's universe to paper. The best introduction to the Mythos in comics is via Alberto Breccia's *Los Mitos de Cthulhu* (1973). The Uruguayan-born Argentinian artist created a volume of incomparable artistic prowess. Showing deep understanding of Lovecraft's horror, he used mechanical weaving, collages, optical effects and other techniques previously unthinkable in a comic book to properly portray the horror that characterizes Lovecraft's tales.

> "I realized that the traditional language of comics could not satisfactorily represent Lovecraft's universe, so I experimented with new techniques such as monotype or collage."
>
> – Alberto Breccia about *Los Mitos de Cthulhu* (Jiménez 2011)

Breccia created some of the most disturbing and intriguing pages ever seen in comics, and as such raised the artistic category of the genre to a new level. According to Jiménez, even forty years after its publication, *Los Mitos de Cthulhu* remains a graphically revolutionary work and one of the best adaptations of literature to comics (Jiménez 2011).

Marvel Comics, arguably one of the most widely recognized comic publishers with a vast lore of its own, seamlessly incorporated the Cthulhu Mythos into the "Multiverse." To no one's surprise, Stan Lee and other creators repurposed the Mythos, claiming it as their own in the unique style of Marvel Comics. Even Lovecraft himself has become a character, writing about the Old Ones otherwise known as the True Faeries. DC Comics's *Batman* features the Arkham Asylum located on the outskirts of Gotham City. *Batman: The Doom that Came to Gotham* by Mike Mignola combines the character Batman with various elements of the Cthulhu Mythos, taking its name from "The Doom that Came to Sarnath" (Lovecraft Fandom 2025b). Joe Hill's *Locke & Key* references many aspects of the Mythos and features a town named Lovecraft and demonic spirits called the Children of Leng.

Based on the annual number of titles released just on *Steam* (a digital distribution service and storefront developed by Valve), video games are currently considered the main representatives of Lovecraftian horror and the Cthulhu Mythos. Video games are unique in how they convey emotions and utilize narratives. When watching a film or reading a book, even those with the wildest imaginations are largely observers of the story. Video games are capable of pulling the audience directly into the story, turning them into the protagonist. This is why the horror genre in video games is thriving: because players experience fear viscerally, especially when the title is consumed in virtual reality.

Amnesia: The Dark Descent (Frictional Games, 2010) was among the first games that used Lovecraft's lack of anthropocentrism and fear of the unknown to its advantage, introducing mechanics such as the management of sanity. Since then, "sanity" has been actively used as a tool in horror video games. To simplify it: the character/player is subjected to fear which in turn reduces sanity; the lower the sanity, the more probable the encounter with cosmic horror and monsters. Lovecraft's influence on the gaming industry has been so immense that it developed its own "tag", "Lovecraftian", when searching for games on digital distribution platforms such as

Steam or the PlayStation and Nintendo Store. No other author has managed to be influential to the point where their visions, ideas, and creations would effectively create a sub-genre of video games.

There are many groundbreaking titles featuring the Cthulhu Mythos. Since it would be impossible to list them all, only the most influential (based on player responses, sales and general success) shall be mentioned. The Cthulhu Mythos video games, or those that are directly inspired by the stories or incorporate a vast portion of the Mythos' elements, can be represented by survival/psychological horror titles such as *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (Headfirst Productions, 2005), *The Sinking City* (Frogwares, 2019), *Call of Cthulhu* (Cyanide, 2018), and *Alone in the Dark* (original: Infogames, 1992; remake: Pieces Interactive, 2023). *Dark Corners of the Earth* deals with Dagon and his servitor race of fish-like people, and is loosely based on the short story "Dagon" (1919). *The Sinking City* is a combination of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* (1936) and "Dagon." It is a detective open-world action game that features worshippers of Dagon, Shub-Niggurath, and Cthulhu. It further uses Lovecraft's fictional New England and other elements of the Mythos. *Alone in the Dark* focuses chiefly on the occult rituals meant for the twisted fertility deity Shub-Niggurath. Set in the deep American South, the protagonist soon encounters monsters, cult conspiracies and mysterious eldritch figure called The Dark Man – a reference and embodiment of Nyarlathotep.

Fantasy video games such as *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2005) incorporated large portions of the Mythos into their own lore. For example, *World of Warcraft* created a servitor race based on Lovecraft tales and paid homage to the most famous deities by including in-game counterparts. The servitor race furthermore utilizes language like the one Lovecraft attributed to the Cthulhu worshippers. The *Dead Space* series, a science-fiction game with a narrative reminiscent of Lovecraft, utilizes both the Cthulhu Mythos and Lovecraftian horror. All three main titles (*Dead Space*, *Dead Space 2*, and *Dead Space 3*) work with the Mythos's elements not by name but by function. The protagonist is stranded on a spaceship where he must face Unitologists, a fanatical cult that worships the Marker, an ancient artifact from deep space. *Dead Space* also features alien races, such as a semi-aquatic alien race similar to HPL's Deep Ones and Necromorphs. While the Unitologists worship Necromorphs, the protagonist is trying to stop the arrival of the Brethren Moon – the last evolutionary stage of Necromorphs whose goal is the eventual killing and total consumption of every living being in the Universe. Brethren Moon's agenda is no different from any Lovecraftian alien creature present in the Mythos.

> "You can kill the prophet, but you can't kill the god! Your chance to warn the Earth has come and gone. We are coming. We are hungry. We are here."
>
> – The Brethren Moons to Isaac Clarke and John Carver in *Dead Space 3: Awakened* (Visceral Games 2013)

Conclusion

This article focused on the development of the Cthulhu Mythos, from its early stages with H. P. Lovecraft and the Lovecraft Circle, through August Derleth's involvement and Lin Carter's adjustments to the contemporary version of the Cthulhu Mythos. It has become clear that the Mythos did not experience the same evolution as other well-known mythoi, such as Tolkien's, Lewis's or Blake's, mostly due to the fact it was a "group project" that has been consistently rewritten and re-made over decades. While Lovecraft's writing has been the primary inspiration, the Mythos has been influenced by other authors throughout the decades since its establishment. Scholars and fans have tried to track the Mythos's history and have been successful to a certain extent. Nonetheless, it is obvious that at a certain point it becomes almost impossible to tell who has influenced whom and what should and should not be considered part of the Mythos. Richard L. Tierney felt most writers that continued the Cthulhu Mythos in fiction or scholarly articles were merely perpetuating the misconceptions that had been begun by Derleth. Ultimately, he believed no one had really taken up where Lovecraft left off as far as the Mythos was concerned (Tierney 1972).

Regarding the questions stated at the beginning, it is safe to say that The Mythos has indeed influenced other genres to varying degrees. Science fiction and horror are the definite carriers of elements and ideologies alongside the Mythos itself. The cultural impact in pop culture is likewise tangible, presenting itself in comics, music and films that pay homage to the late master of horror.

In conclusion, the cultural impact of the Cthulhu Mythos and H. P. Lovecraft's writing has been immense and immeasurable. It successfully developed its own sub-division that is easily recognized and has become a trademark in media and popular culture. Cthulhu as a character is one of the most popular antagonists of all time. Lovecraft's philosophy of cosmicism, his Pantheon, invocations and obscure grimoires had such strong appeal religious organizations such as the Church of Satan or the occult society Ordo Templi Orientis were founded on its basis or borrowed some of the elements. Respected and influential authors of the 21st century have credited Lovecraft over and over when discussing their own work. The Cthulhu Mythos did not have the same background evolution as other famous mythoi, and its beginning was small and insignificant, yet one rarely encounters someone who has not heard the name Cthulhu at least once.

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