

Michał Oracz

# DE PROFUNDIS

Cthulhu Gaming on the Edge of Madness



# Credits

## For Wydawnictwo Portal (Polish Credits):

De Profundis written by: **Michał Oracz**  
Graphics, layout, and illustration by: **Michał Oracz**

Chapters written by:

On Conventions, Societies, Society Sheets: **Marcel Gałka**  
Synopsis of a typical 1920 De Profundis campaign: **Marcel Gałka**  
De Profundis & Traditional RPGs: **Rafał Szyma**  
De Profundis Online: **Michał Oracz**  
Chapters edited by: **Rafał Szyma**

## For Cubicle 7 Translation:

Publishers: **Angus Abranson and Dominic McDowall-Thomas**  
Production Manager: **Dominic McDowall-Thomas**  
Managing Developer: **Sarah Newton**  
Translation by: **Marcin Slapa and Maja Apollonia Pica**  
Edited by: **Nimrod Jones and Sarah Newton**  
Englished by: **Sarah Newton**  
Layout by: **Paul Bourne**  
Proofreading by: **Nimrod Jones and Sarah Newton**

**De Profundis is published by Wydawnictwo Portal**  
© 2001 Wydawnictwo Portal and Michał Oracz, all rights reserved  
ul. Św. Urbana 15; 44-100 Gliwice, Poland  
<http://www.wydawnictwoportal.pl>

This English edition is published by  
**Cubicle 7 Entertainment Ltd**  
Riverside House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES, UK  
Reg. no. 6036414

Find out more about De Profundis and our other games at:  
[www.cubicle7.co.uk](http://www.cubicle7.co.uk)

© 2010 Cubicle 7 Entertainment Ltd

CB71401

Printed in the USA



# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>Societies</b>	<b>65</b>
The Dream	4	Society Sheet	65
The New Wave	5	Society Goal	66
De Profundis	6	Society Members	66
The Three Pillars	7	Detailed Arrangements	67
Psychodrama	8	Knowledge Available to All Members	67
		Updating the Society Sheet	68
		Society Sheets	68
<b>Book One</b> <i>Letters from the Abyss</i>	<b>10</b>	<b>Synopsis of a typical 1920</b>	
H.P. Lovecraft and an Idea	10	<b>De Profundis campaign</b>	<b>77</b>
H.P. Lovecraft: Universe and Canon	12	Avenues of Enquiry	78
The Society	14	Domino and Primer	81
De Profundis and the Call of Cthulhu	15	<b>De Profundis &amp; Traditional RPGs</b>	<b>84</b>
Societies and the Network	16	Correspondence between Game Masters	84
Me or My Character?	17	Correspondence between Players	84
The Two Periods	19	De Profundis as an RPG play aid	85
Two Characters in the Two Periods	20	<b>De Profundis Online</b>	<b>86</b>
The Country	22	De Profundis by email	86
Style	23	Two Uses for the Net	87
Psyche and Action	25	Paper Age	88
What shall I write about?	28	Internet Age	89
Realism and Atmosphere Above All	32	Characters in the Internet age	91
Interaction	34	Mood, style and Plot	92
Pacing	35	Playing on forums	93
The Conspiracy	36	Quick Game	94
Metamorphosis and End	37	Base Address	95
Parcels, Diaries and the Like	39	Hmm...	95
Keep Your Letters!	41	Message returned to sender	96
		<b>Appendices</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Book Two</b> <i>Phantasmagoria</i>	<b>43</b>	Appendix A: Finding Games	97
Field Psychodrama	43	Appendix B: Character & Organisation Archetypes	98
The Horror at your Window	45	Appendix C: In the World of Psychodrama	99
		<b>On Conventions</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Book Three</b> <i>The Hermitage</i>	<b>49</b>	The Convention doesn't change	53
Solo Psychodrama	49	Tables	55
The Mechanics of Questions	51	Combining Conventions	56
The Final Letter	52	The Convention and the Player Characters	56
		Sample Conventions	57

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

Greetings!

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Psychodrama

.....2nd February, 1999

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

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

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

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



