

Towards an H.P. Lovecraft Telephone Alphabet

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Abstract

This paper is a proposal for an H.P. Lovecraft-themed telephone alphabet, for the benefit of what may remain of humanity when the Earth has been brought beneath the sway of the *Great Old Ones* once again. The possibilities of a number of popular schemes are explored, including character's names, topography, and adjectives, with some elucidation where the author deemed such to be necessary.

1 Introduction

Mishearing of spoken information can be caused by noisy environments, limited bandwidth of communication channels, or propagation losses. In such circumstances some means is required to prevent misinterpretation of messages. The development of telephone alphabets, also known as spelling or radio alphabets, accompanied the advent of radio and telephone communications around the turn of the twentieth century [1]; these alphabets remain in use today as an aid to ensure the undistorted passing of messages.

Many variants exist to facilitate different professional cultures, scripts, and languages (including phenomena such as \emptyset and *ch*). Perhaps the most prominent of these is the NATO phonetic alphabet [2] (*Alfa, Bravo, Charlie, Delta*, etc.).

The twentieth century author H.P. Lovecraft pointed out [3] that members of various species of extraterrestrial beings, collectively known as the *Great Old Ones*, ruled the Earth for aeons before the rise of Man. A number of these now lie sleeping in an ancient, sunken city named R'yeh, allegedly located in the Southern Pacific Ocean. It is suggested that when these supposedly very powerful creatures awake they will reclaim sovereignty over the Earth, and that the future of mankind will be rendered forfeit therewith.

While we could optimistically imagine that some small portion of the human population might survive that apocalypse, it is fair to assume that communication will be difficult and hampered by the global destruction of familiar infrastructure caused

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by the rising *Old Ones*. For this reason, an appropriate telephone alphabet will certainly be convenient. This telephone alphabet should be relevant to mankind’s predicament and, if possible, conducive to understanding between *Old Ones* and humans.

2 Proposed alphabets

Individual telephone alphabets frequently are made up of words in a certain theme. Often they are made up of proper nouns, traditional first names or city names [1]. Other possibilities are adjectives and nomenclature from some literary body or mythological framework. For our current objective, we draw from the works of H.P. Lovecraft, which form the foundation of the famous *Cthulhu Mythos*.

Method

For this first attempt we have established four different thematic categories: Nomenclature, Person, Topography, and Adjective. Our approach is to read any Lovecraft story that we have available—for instance [3] and [4]—and collect any specimens therein that fit in the aforementioned categories (further elaborated upon in subsequent sections).

If multiple candidates are found for a single letter in one of the categories, further selection is made using three criteria. In order of decreasing weight they are

- Is it Lovecraftian?
- Is it acrophonic?
- Is it horrible/terrible?

For example, for *A* we find three prominent names: *Akeley*, *Alhazred*, and *Angell*. All three are known from the *Cthulhu Mythos*, but while *Alhazred* is regarded as horrible and *Angell*’s fate is terrible, *Akeley* gives us the best acrophonic match (that is, the first letter of the pronounced word is most similar to the associated letter). In this manner we arrive at “*A* for *Akeley*”. Results for all categories are enumerated in Table 1.

The Nomenclature Category

In the *Cthulhu Mythos* the names of various strange creatures are revealed. These beings have been described as being exceedingly horrible and therefore are conveniently memorable as well. The Nomenclature alphabet is compiled using the names of some of the most notable *Old Ones*.

The extraterrestrial origin of the *Old Ones* gives rise to some concerns in the compilation of this alphabet. Notably the true names of *Azathoth* and *Yog-Sothoth* are said to be unpronounceable by humans [5] due to dissimilar evolution of vocal chords of humans and *Old Ones*. However, the rendering into regular written speech does not give rise to incompatible variation in pronunciation and we therefore take these to be sufficiently consistent. In contrast, the name of arguably the most celebrated *Old One*, frequently written as *Cthulhu*, has presently been omitted from the alphabet, as the spelling of the name of that Great Priest varies considerably in places. One notable example is the spelling used for the song

The Call of Ktulu by metal band Metallica, potentially giving rise to confusion among metal fans due to its popularity there (“Pardon me, but is that *C* for *Cthulhu* or *K* for *Ktulu*?”).

The Person Category

For the Person alphabet all named human characters in the part of the Lovecraft canon under scrutiny, and closely related to its evolution were considered¹. Protagonists, antagonists, and historic and legendary figures were treated alike. Vessels’ names are included here as well.

Table 1: Four themed telephone alphabets, partially incomplete (see text).

Letter	Nomenclature	Person	Topography	Adjective
A	Azathoth	Akeley	Arkham	Antedeluvian
B	-	Brinton	Brattleboro	Brooding
C	-	Castro	Cosmos	Cyclopean
D	Dagon	Dyer	Dunwich	Disembodied
E	Elder Things	Emma	Exham Priory	Eldritch
F	-	Fort	Fish Street	Fossiliferous
G	-	Goodenough	Gilman House	Gelatinous
H	Hastur	Halsey	Hyperborea	Horrible
I	Iä	-	Innsmouth	Immense
J	-	Johansen	-	Jurassic
K	Klarkash-Ton	Kuranos	Kadath	Kaleidoscopic
L	-	Lovecraft	Leng Plateau	Loathsome
M	Mi-Go	Moulton	Miskatonic	Mausolean
N	Necronomicon	Noyes	New England	Non-Euclidean
O	Old Ones	Orne	Ooth-Nargai	Organic
P	-	Pierce	Providence	Protoplasmic
Q	-	-	-	Quivering
R	-	Rice	R’lyeh	Remote
S	Shoggoth	Soames	Salem	Stygian
T	Tsathoggua	Thurston	Tartarus	Terrible
U	-	-	Ulthar	Unutterable
V	-	Vigilant	Vermont	Vivid
W	-	Wilmarth	-	Weird
X	-	-	-	Xenophobic
Y	Yog-Sothoth	-	Yuggoth	Yawning
Z	Zoog	Zadok	Zakarion	Zodiacal

¹It is interesting to note that the letter *W* features prominently as initial among important characters in the *Cthulhu Mythos*. *Wilmarth*, *West*, *Ward*, *Wilcox*, *Whateley*.

The Topography Category

Topography plays an important role as an atmospheric element in the stories. While reading, it seems to us that towns and geographical features become actors in their own right, and subsequently a mere mentioning of any of their names induces an ominous feeling of sinisterness and horror, the character of which resembles that which accompanies the *Old Ones* themselves, albeit perhaps in lesser magnitude.

The Adjective Category

One of the most characteristic and exciting features of Lovecraft's work is the abundance of adjectives. We may even go so far as to say that as long as the stories will be read, the continuing existence of dictionaries should be guaranteed. *Obdurate*, *eldritch*, and *non-Euclidean* are examples of narrative ornamentation that will entice many a reader to read on and search for more, even as he encounters the dreaded Mi-Go, who leer at us from distant Yuggoth.

3 Combined Alphabet

Some of the alphabets in Table 1 are presently incomplete, but we may construct a combined and complete Lovecraft Telephone Alphabet involving the four proposed categories using the criteria discussed in the previous chapter to further reduce ambiguity. A first attempt is given in Table 2 (also denoted as bold entries in Table 1).

Table 2: Combined alphabet.

A	for	Akeley
B	for	Brattleboro
C	for	Cyclopean
D	for	Dagon
E	for	Eldritch
F	for	Fish Street
G	for	Gelatinous
H	for	Hyperborea
I	for	Innsmouth
J	for	Jurassic
K	for	Kaleidoscopic
L	for	Lovecraft
M	for	Miskatonic
N	for	Non-Euclidean
O	for	Old Ones
P	for	Providence
Q	for	Quivering
R	for	R'lyeh
S	for	Salem
T	for	Tartarus
U	for	Unutterable
V	for	Vigilant
W	for	Weird
X	for	Xenophobic
Y	for	Yuggoth
Z	for	Zoog

4 Afterword

Future work on this subject is likely to mainly consist of maintenance of the tables; the remaining empty slots in Table 1 may be filled using material from presently unprocessed Lovecraft stories or the works of other authors who expanded upon the *Cthulhu Mythos*. The combined alphabet should also be thoroughly tested for phonetic ambiguities in order to establish a truly robust Lovecraft Telephone Alphabet. This may mean that hereafter entries will

be chosen from the entire uncategorized pool of terms from the *Cthulhu Mythos* rather than the segmented approach employed here, to achieve the greater dynamic range in terms of phonetic variety, cadences, and number of syllables.

References

- [1] Wikipedia (consulted on 2013/09/18). *Spelling alphabet*. URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spelling_alphabet.
- [2] Wikipedia (consulted on 2013/10/16). *NATO phonetic alphabet*. URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NATO_phonetic_alphabet.
- [3] H.P. Lovecraft, edited by S.T. Joshi (1999). *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*. London: Penguin Classics, 1999.
- [4] H.P. Lovecraft (1936). *At the Mountains of Madness*. Toronto: Prohyptikon, 2010.
- [5] A Wyrd Documentary (2008). *Lovecraft, Fear of the Unknown*. Wyrd Studios.