

DEATH'S HEAD
a role-playing game
COMPONENTS: Skull and Soldier



During World War II, Nazi Germany maintained a special organization within the Schutzstaffel that was primarily responsible for administering concentration camps throughout occupied territory. Known as "SS-Totenkopfverbände" or "Death's Head Units," these troops facilitated the Nazi genocide during the Holocaust.

Death's Head personnel were known for being Nazi fanatics, and participated in various war crimes and atrocities during the conflict.

Nazi Germany's entanglement with the occult is a somewhat controversial subject that is in many cases overstated in the media. However, with the folkloric *völkisch* ideology that influenced Nazism and Heinrich Himmler's dabbling in mysticism, the myth of the Nazis' occult leanings continues to flourish.

This game is an extension (in the vein of Vril Society conspiracy theories and good ol' Indiana Jones) of that myth, and maybe a little bit of an exploration into the psychology of those who commit atrocities.

The Game

In DEATH'S HEAD, players are dropped in the boots of SS-TV troopers as they administrate a concentration camp. What starts as a relatively routine "day at the office," however, turns supernatural.

Like something out of the most vicious of blood libel rumors, concentration camp prisoners become flesh eating monstrosities. There's really no easy or politically correct way to say this, so I'll just say it: yeah, this is a zombie game set in a concentration camp.

To play you need:

- Paper and some pencils
- One 8-sided dice (a d8)
- One coin
- One chess board
- One set of chess pieces, black and white
- A computer with Winamp on it; OR a burned CD and a CD player with shuffle
- Two or three players; two or three SS-TV players, and one Game Master to facilitate

Character Generation

STEP ONE: INTERROGATIONS

There is no pre-game character generation in DEATH'S HEAD.

Players will create their characters by the seat of their pants by responding to in-character questions from the GM and the other players not being interrogated. This may seem a little strange, but I'll try my best to guide you through it.

The interrogating players will play agents of a fictional US Military Tribunal, who are concerned with bringing the captured SS-TV members to post-war justice. Essentially, the SS-TV are going up against US military lawyers and personnel who want to prosecute them for the acts they committed during the war (one of which is the liquidation of the camp at which the "supernatural" activity supposedly occurred).

As mentioned, this first scene of the game takes place *after* the incident (and possibly the war) is over.

Frame this scene inside a Military Tribunal courtroom, or someplace similar.

Start by deciding who's going first in the hotseat. The players who don't (including the GM), will be playing the roles of the interrogators; decide "who" these interrogators will be- they are probably military lawyers or something similar, but they could be other people. Perhaps one of the victims of Nazi atrocities in the area was brought in to testify?

Don't worry about trying to imitate court procedure or anything like that, and don't worry about sounding goofy or stupid. Free-form role play this scene out, asking questions:

- "What is your name?" / "Please state your name for the court."
- "Tell me about the incident on the night of [date]."
- "How did you go about executing the prisoners at camp [name of fictional concentration camp]?" / "Were any of the prisoners armed?" / "How were you and your men armed?"

It might be easier to keep with emotionally detached questions, but don't be afraid to have one of your interrogators lose their cool:

- "What was going through your mind when you were killing unarmed civilians in cold blood?"
- "How did these crimes make you feel? How'd you feel afterwards? Sleeping well at night?"

If you are the one **being** interrogated:

- Try to answer all the questions; the purpose of this is character development (and the answers you give will affect your character sheet later on, as detailed below)
- If you freeze up and need time to think, just call "time out". Maybe do some looking at wikipedia before the game, particularly this article (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS-Totenkopfverb%C3%A4nde>)
- Don't worry about being 100% historically accurate with weapons, names and other details
- It's up to you whether or not to recount details of the supernatural events that you supposedly experienced. Details here will help the GM know what you'd like to see in the game, but from an in-character perspective, your interrogators may not believe you. Don't worry if you get into in-character shit for what you describe (i.e. don't worry if the interrogators don't believe you).

If you are **doing** the interrogating:

- Try to give questions that will help create character options (this will become a little more clear reading the rest of this document)
- Play off of the other player. If, for example, someone says “I was responsible for liquidating [Village X],” don’t respond “There’s no such thing as [Village X]!” Try to come up with prompts that move the fiction forward (“I’m not familiar with [Village X], where is it?”)
- Assume that there was no evidence found of any supernatural events that supposedly transpired, or assume that any evidence of it can be explained through logical means

STEP TWO: CHARACTER NOTES

During the interrogation phase, interrogators should take notes on the responses they are given. These should be things that describe the character or their actions in some way.

Examples:

- “Equipped with explosives”
- “Used a Karabiner 98 rifle”
- “Part of the SS medical corps”
- “Remorseless killer”
- “Assisted in the liquidation of KZ Camp 152”
- “Had a soft spot for the inmates”
- “Had a relationship with one of the camp Kapos”
- “Staunch Nazi fanatic”
- “Relatives in the Nazi establishment”
- “Member of the Hitler Youth”

Adding (and asking about) items one and two (the weaponry) on the list are particularly important, since that gives the character easy entry into the beginning of the game.

For those **doing** the interrogation:

- You can stop taking notes once you each have 6 of these descriptive character Traits. Try to get closer to 10, just so you can present the player with more options.
- After the interrogation scene is over, hand the sheet of your notes to the player you just interrogated

STEP THREE: ASSIGN CHESS PIECES

At this point, the interrogations should be done, and each interrogated player should have a list of notes about their character.

Once the sheets are in hand, go down the list and inspect the Traits ascribed to you.

Choose 6 Traits from the notes and rewrite them on the back of the paper.

Next to each of them, record the name of a chess piece that you wish to assign to it (this will be explained further below).

There are 6 types of chess pieces: Pawns, Bishops, Knights, Queens, Kings, and Rooks. You may assign each one only **once** to each trait you have written down.

If you'd like to know more about why you are doing this, skip ahead to the next section entitled "Traits/The Chess Board."

For the moment though, keep these basic guidelines in mind:

- Assign each piece only once
- You probably want to assign the trait that you think you'll be using most to your pawns so that you don't box your other pieces in
- You will be moving a piece on the chess board every time a trait is invoked, so plan around that
- In this game, the pieces move exactly like they do in a game of chess. If you need to know how they move, see here: (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chess#Movement>)

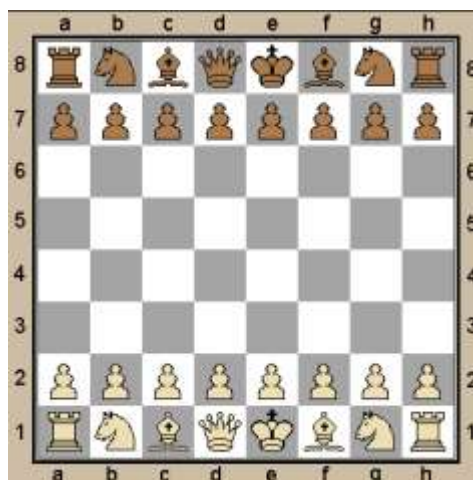
Traits/The Chess Board

OK. At this point, I should probably explain why you just assigned all those pieces to the list of Traits the interrogators attributed to you.

By the way, Traits are just a fancy name for "things written down by the interrogators." "Member of the Hitler Youth," for example, is a Trait.

First, if you haven't done so already, set up the chess board. If you're having trouble with the initial positions, check that Wikipedia article I linked above. Second- take a deep breath. This game is *not* a chess tournament. You don't have to be good at chess to play.

The board should look like this when you're done:



You will be taking control over White to start with.

Now for Traits. The way Traits work is every time one is invoked in the game, you move a piece on the chess board. What does that mean?

As an example, let's say you have the following Traits written on your sheet (the piece assigned to them is in parentheses):

- "Used a Karabiner 98 rifle" (Pawn)
- "Part of the SS medical corps" (Knight)
- "Remorseless killer" (King)
- "Assisted in the liquidation of KZ Camp 152" (Rook)
- "Had a soft spot for the inmates" (Bishop)
- "Had a relationship with one of the camp Kapos" (Queen)

Let's further say that during the first phase of the game, the camp uprising, you declared "I shoot one of the prisoners between the eyes with my rifle."

Voila. It happens. The guy gets shot between the eyes and you narrate what happens.

Now, move a Pawn on the chessboard. Why are you doing this? Because the shooting has "activated" your "Used a Karabiner 98 rifle" Trait. You used the rifle, so you invoked the Trait. Make sense?

After you move your Pawn, the GM gets to move a piece. The GM may move any piece that can legally move, she need not move a Pawn. This is called a Response. Thematically, the GM's Responses symbolize the accumulating consequences of your actions and how they limit your future possibilities.

Narrating Actions

As the SS-TV players, one of your immediate priorities is keeping your pieces. If you lose a piece, you lose some ability to narrate actions related to the Trait it corresponds to (as do the other players; all your pieces are pooled in this game). Let me explain how this works.

In DEATH'S HEAD, there are no "success checks." Ordinarily, if you want to do something, you do it and you narrate the result. You do not have to "roll against" the GM to see if you blow a prisoner away, you can just do it and narrate how you do it.

This changes when you lose pieces.

If one of your pieces is captured, there is a chance that the GM will get to narrate how your actions unfold. This chance corresponds to how many pieces you currently have in play on the chess board.

Let's say that two of your pawns were captured. Your pawns are tied to your "Used a Karabiner 98 rifle" Trait. In chess, and in this game, you start with 8 pawns on the board, meaning you have 6 still left in play.

Now, say you wanted to try to club a man over the head with the butt of your rifle. This action invokes "Used a Karabiner 98 rifle", but you only have 6 of your 8 pawns available. In this case, move a pawn

like normal, BUT roll a d8. On a 1-6, you control the narrative (meaning you can dictate success or failure and anything in between). On a 7 or 8, the GM controls the narrative (meaning she can dictate the result of the action).

If you lose a piece that there is only two of (such as a Knight, Rook, or Bishop), flip a coin when invoking it to see who has control of the outcome.

If you lose your queen, you lose narrative control over the Trait tied to it until you get a Queen back.

Anytime your King comes into check, you lose narrative control over the Trait tied to it the *next time* it is invoked.

This applies to all Traits. Basically, when your pieces are captured and removed from the chess board, your Traits fall more and more into the hands of the GM.

Think about each move you make, as any captures the GM makes affect both you and the other SS-TV players.

Phases One: The Camp

Once you've got a character, and the board is set, and everyone understands the rules, the GM will start by framing the central scene of the game.

As GM, it might make some sense to bone up a little bit on the sordid history of concentration camps. Pick a real camp, and *base* your fictional camp around it. I'd advise against using a real camp, as players might feel uncomfortable doing that for various reasons, both historical and personal.

That noted, it's probably a good idea to talk over what kinds of issues players would prefer to keep off limits before getting into the meat of play. Don't assume that because people are willing to play a game like this that they don't have their limits and hot button issues.

Before you start off, answering these questions may help give you some direction:

- Roughly where is the camp located?
- What type of camp is it? Extermination? Labor?
- Do the SS-TV have any special orders regarding the prisoners inside the camp?
- Who are some of the prisoners that inhabit the camps? Any standouts?
- How do the SS-TV troops get along with each other?

As the GM, it's your responsibility, first and foremost, to play off of the players. You set the scene up and play all the NPCs that float in and out. Try to unfold the environment of the camp enough so that people will want to explore it and start up free-form role-playing with the NPCs.

Remember that while the players have all their pieces, you aren't really in a position to refuse them outright. Instead, use NPCs as leverage to guide players towards things that you want to highlight in the session.

One useful type of NPC for doing this is the Kapo. Kapos were inmate guards, many times convicts, who held special police privilege over the other prisoners. Kapos can be a good way for a GM to dispense information about what's going on in the camp. In addition, their love for brutality might make them easy to put in the middle of player conflicts with NPCs that get out of hand.

Remind players that every action they take prompts a Response on the chess board. Do not flaunt this; instead, use it to coax players who may be "stuck in a rut" towards a more diverse set of actions.

There are a couple things you have to do before you frame the first scene inside the camp, however.

First, you must set a random timer that will tell players when the second phase of the game, The Hordes, begins.

In order to do this, compose a random playlist of songs on WinAmp, or burn some of them onto a CD. I'd recommend some thematic World War II ballads, but you can use whatever you want. The playlist should be at least 15-20 songs long, maybe shorter depending on the length of the songs. Designate **two** songs on the playlist that will serve as special cues, then set your WinAmp or CD player to shuffle (I prefer using WinAmp because it has a more robust shuffling feature). Start the player before you begin the camp scene.

Phase Two: The Hordes

When either one of the designated cue songs starts playing, play proceeds to **Phase Two**, which is the point at which unknown supernatural phenomenon transforms the camp's inhabitants into zombies. Poor souls once battered and crushed under the crippling jackboot of the Nazis now menace their captors as supernatural terrors.

One thing to say about Phase Two, in a fictional sense, is that it is about losing control. In Phase One, the SS-TV are for the most part the masters of the camp. Their status is unchallenged, and their cruelty left unchecked. Phase Two shatters all of that.

Just as Phase Two turns the tables on the complacent SS-TV troops, the tables are turned- literally- on you the player. When the musical cue for Phase Two sounds, **flip the chess board around**; you are now playing Black. The board setup stays as it is; it **does not** reset.

Winning and Losing

If the SS-TV get checkmated during Phase One, the game ends with them losing control over the camp. This happens in a relatively mundane way- perhaps a riot or another uprising.

If the SS-TV *give* checkmate during Phase One, the game ends with them in control over the camp, plus something else beneficial for them happens. Maybe the commanders get a promotion. Maybe the men are granted a brief leave for a job well done.

If the SS-TV get checkmated during Phase Two, they are overrun by the undead and pass out and wake up in the interrogation room. This is an ambiguous ending.

If the SS-TV *give* checkmate during Phase Two, they kill all the zombies and the game ends with them

being heralded as heroes to their community. They don their finest dress uniforms and march in a parade honoring their bravery. The Fuhrer himself salutes them.

In any event, the game ends when a checkmate occurs. After the game ends, go to the **Epilogue Phase**.

So... are there actually zombies?

Something else to say about Phase Two is that, well, it might not actually be happening as described above. Is it possible that a concentration camp full of near-skeletal prisoners is transformed, with a zap, into a horde of flesh-craving fiends? Well, anything's *possible*. But is it really likely? Is there something else going on in the heads of the men of the Death's Head unit? As you play the Epilogue Phase, reflect on this.

Phase Three: Epilogue

In Phase Three, players take on the role of modern historians combing through the wreckage of the fictional concentration camp you created for the game. This is a good time to reflect on the question above: "So... are there actually zombies?"

Putter around the remains of the camp going "hmmm, hmmm," and reflect on everything that happened there. Spend a little bit of time pondering the lives of the SS-TV men and the people they killed. If you want to do a flashback that shows what became of your character after the war, you can do so now.