

The Dead White World presents a pleasing departure for Cthulhu gaming. Rather than facing the horrors of the Mythos under the framework of saving the world, or at the least foiling a nefarious plot, Dead White World puts normal people in a terrible situation: the world has ended, at the hand of unknowable forces – and your small group of characters survived. It is set in 1936, in England, and takes players from Dover to London to the Severn Valley, finally ending in Blackpool.

This review is based on a just-concluded run of the adventures, with a group of 6 people including myself. Only two of us had any prior experience with GUMSHOE or Trail of Cthulhu (the adventure in the Trail rulebook, to be exact) but the game ran quite smoothly with only one moment of pause (explained near the end of the review where I talk about Substance).

The Dead White World is apparently the first three scenarios from an upcoming Trail of Cthulhu supplement (no release date noted as I write this) called The Apocalypse Machine that will deal with post-apocalyptic Cthulhu Mythos gaming – and by post-apocalypse, let me note we are speaking in the broader sense of the term – a situation where civilization as we know it has ended, though in this case by most sinister agents than nuclear bombs. There are here and there notes on how the modified skills and rules for the Apocalypse Machine supplement work with the scenarios. Some might find this distracting, but overall it did not bother me as I read and ran the scenarios.

To avoid spoilers, I will attempt to briefly outline each scenario, with notes as to strengths or weaknesses that my play-through noted. I'll happily deal in spoilers and specifics in the comments thread attached to this review.

The PDF is divided into three scenarios, and an initial chunk of introductory text that provides some pre-generated characters and alternate rules for Trail of Cthulhu.

When running the scenarios, I opted to use the pre-generated characters, as they seemed to be quite colorful, interesting, and fitting for the year the game takes place in – 1936. There are guidelines for how to weave your own custom characters into the scenario, but my players took to the pre-generated PCs like ducks to water after reading their descriptive text.

After the play character info is given, there is a section for Supporting Cast, with some nice notes for role-playing these important non-player characters. These notes draw a lot of inspiration from stage technique, and I found they gave me a good grasp of the characters and their mannerisms that I would need to play them as Keeper.

Following this is a section called The Rules. This area notes how best to use Purist/Pulp rules variants presented in the core rulebook to give the players a bit of a chance when facing the apocalyptic setting of The Dead White World, provides a brief aside regarding the added mechanics that the Apocalypse Machine supplement will provide to give a more post-apocalyptic feel to Trail of Cthulhu gaming. This is a slight negative for some people, I think – it's a bit of a tease and the full Apocalypse Machine supplement seems to be quite a ways off – but it does not detract from the scenarios presented. Also found here are notes on handling common player reactions to being in a Cthulhu game: acquiring powerful weapons, dealing with death, etc.

By far the best sections here are the ones called “Drive Yourself Mad” and “Rave On”. In the former, the author moves the player-facing nature of Trail of Cthulhu even further into the hands of investigators, and put the onus of Stability and Sanity Loss squarely on the shoulders of the players after some initial familiarization. Players are encouraged to decide how their characters would take certain Stability losses, based on their history or profession, etc. In theory, I could see some players taking advantage of this, but in my play through, this worked quite well, though by the grim third scenario, a bit of peer pressure became evident among the players regarding the most Stable among them and if they had been realistic in their taking Stability losses. No worries, though – by the end they all went mad, with a tremendous shoot out among the investigators claiming all but one life, and leaving the survivor insane from the horrible acts she had committed in doing what she thought was ‘right’. Good stuff!

“Rave On” removes the “death-spiral” like penalties for suffering Stability Loss that can often stop an investigation cold, as well as explicitly allowing an insane player character to keep playing until a good exit opportunity presents itself or is decided. This makes going mad a thrill to be enjoyed – indeed, the point of playing a Cthulhu game, in the minds of many players – as opposed to a punishment to be avoided.

Overall, I found these two changes in attitude from the core rulebook to be quite liberating for myself – it allowed me to keep the narrative in mind, work on my descriptions, and let the rules fall into the background where, in horror games, I feel they belong.

Finally, this section provides an alternative presentation for clues. The core information of the clue is given, and then examples of what skills might uncover it and how the information is relayed are noted. This small difference in presentation makes the information contained in the clue feel more important, and gives the impression of flexibility to the Keeper who can then decide what skill context to wrap the information in as the players investigate. It may merely be a shift in perception, but this kept my mind on the clue and its key info, as opposed to skills and their usage; to be sure, this may require a Keeper to think more on their toes, but you can also choose to look at character abilities and pre-make some potential informative text for approaches you assume players will use. I tried this for the first scene, and the practice actually made me feel more confident going forward – after that I was improvising ability results quite freely when a player's described approach felt like it would in some way unearth the clue info.

Each scenario has a core question the player characters are trying to answer as they investigate, and all clues inform this core question. The scenarios are organized in typical Gumshoe System fashion: a Hook is presented, then the central Question, followed by the Horrible Truth to give the Keeper some context for the rest of the scenario, and then the Spine which describes the overarching sequence of events and play for the scenario. Following these initial pieces, each scene and set piece is described, with clue information attached and potential ways to reveal the information with sample clues.

The Dead White World is the titular first scenario, featuring the players waking up as survivors of a train crash while on the way to a wedding in Dover. They soon find the world has experienced a devastating turn of events while they lay unconscious, and the vast bulk of humanity has succumbed to a strange and horrific death from an unexpected quarter. In the final scene, the players learn the ironic origin of this doom, and also discover that other entities have noted the demise of the human race, and are now stirring... Top the scenario off with a potentially fatal dash to escape Dover. A lot of this first scenario is getting to explore the aftermath of the world's end, and a good Keeper with a good feel for horrific description or creepy situations can have a good time with this scenario.

Letters from Ghosts is the second scenario, and deals with the survivors finding letters sent to them from relatives they are sure are dead. This leads to checking on the survival of friends and relatives in London, and from there a trail of strange and unlikely clues lead the group of investigators to learn the mind-boggling fate of their loved ones. This scenario has some "secret instructions" to give the players that ratchet up paranoia and tension, and give several interesting short and long-term wrinkles to the scenarios. Mythos fans will note some recognizable elements here and in the final scenario. I briefly had the players treat London as a massive market, and they left the dead city with a van full of weapons, supplies, and the usual things that a group of roleplayers might assemble. This was all for naught, as the only things the players ended up killing with these requisitioned guns ended were each other in the final scene of the three scenarios.

Finally, Sandgrown deals with the group travelling to Blackpool, an English seaside city with a formerly bustling promenade and beach. Here they must puzzle out vague instructions they have received from their loved ones in Letters from Ghosts, and try to determine which of two possible invasions they have been asked to stop.

Organized human survivors are met, and there seems to be a possibility for some sort of respite from the horrors that have assailed the characters, but it is all short lived as the insidious menace that first appeared in The Dead White World re-appears. Scenes and events suggested by the author allow for several cruel and sinister twists to those recurring terrors that the players may have started to get used

to. I improvised a bit around these ideas to create something a bit more personal and disconcerting, but without the ideas given by the author, I would not have come up with the scenes I decided to spin.

Sandgrown ends with a final set piece that, upon first reading, I was not sure I could convincingly “sell” to my players, but I should not have worried – the final scene was easily the most horrifying in the entire game, as characters had their minds crack, and guns were turned upon one another when no one could decide exactly which invasion the group had been sent to stop. Preparation and going over how best to describe this final scene are probably a good idea here, but by this final scene, hopefully players are quite invested, the atmosphere has been established, and disbelief has been suspended, tied up, and left in a closet. That said, it might not be swallowed by every group if it is not presented well.

Everyone was very happy with the scenario at its end. It was bleak, very Lovecraftian, and will be remembered as a gaming highlight by myself for many years to come. A lot of the credit for the excellent series of sessions must rest on the author – Graham Walmsley – who has crafted a horrible situation for players to navigate that is not a familiar Mythos monster charging down upon you, or a cult needing foiling. For this original conceit, I must applaud the author. His many sidebars, ideas, and notes (including the Save Vs. Apocalypse sidebar on escaping Dover as it is destroyed) make the scenario an inspiring piece to run.

In terms of style, *The Dead White World* is very nice. It is quite legible, well laid out but for the pre-generated characters, and though it does not have a large amount of artwork, the artwork present is very nice and evocative. Ideally, the pre-generated characters would be presented in a way that would allow them to be printed and used ready-for-play as opposed to flowing with the text across columns and pages. I opted to put the characters onto proper sheets, but for a convention or a pick-up game, having a character per page or per half-page would lend them greater utility. Pictures for the pre-generated characters would likewise increase the style rating. As a note, the zip file I bought did have a printer-friendly version and a fancier version with a weathered page background to the pages seen in other *Trail of Cthulhu* products. Additionally there are a total of 6 prop handwritten letters for use in the second scenario, “Letters from Ghosts”. Overall, I give it a 4.

In terms of substance, the set of scenarios is fantastic. Between the excellently written scenarios, the alternative take on the standard rules for Stability and Sanity, and so on, *The Dead White World* is a great set of adventures, and a bargain at \$6.95 for the amount of horrific enjoyment it brought our group.

One slight niggling issue in terms of substance was we were not sure how to navigate losing Pillars of Sanity vs. a Pillar of Sanity crumbling from within when using the player-facing Stability and Sanity options. This was not a major issue, but it did give us pause as we tried to figure it out.

That minor issue is not enough to stop this excellent product from receiving a substance score of 5, however.

For Call of Cthulhu players, this set of three scenarios could be readily adapted to the BRP system, but a CoC Keeper would need to work hard to impart the sanity-threatening impact of the situation the player characters thread their way through. Trail of Cthulhu makes this somewhat easier to impart using the Pillars of Sanity mechanic, but some well written character backgrounds and motivations may do the job in Call of Cthulhu.

Overall, the three scenarios are light on combat, but potentially heavy on inter-party friction as the group struggles over how to interpret clues, and what choices to make in the face of the apocalypse. If that suits your Call of Cthulhu style, and the burden of adapting from one (admittedly fairly light) system to BRP does not put you off, The Dead White World may well provide you with an interesting and enjoyable new spin on Cthulhu gaming.

Also, please note that though the three scenarios of The Dead White World end in a horrific climax (at least for my group), there are intended to be 9 more scenarios that take the Cthulhu Apocalypse across the Atlantic to America, and elsewhere. Though TheDead White World is fairly self-contained, I cannot help but want to see more of this excellent series published.

Still, horror gaming may work best when played in discrete chunks, so in this instance I will merely wish for more to be published when the stars are right... and my group has recovered from the intense experience we shared while playing these scenarios.