

VAMPIRES

a postmodern roleplaying game

by Victor Gijsbers

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Your heart burns for love
My soul burns for blood
I'll take you, I'll break you
I'll crush you, I'll break you

Inkubus Sukkubus, ‘Vampyre Erotica’

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1 Male, with pointy teeth

This is a roleplaying game about vampires. Not about vampires engaged in intricate plots concerning ancient works of art and forbidden knowledge. Not about vampires that are addicted to blood for its own sake, and constantly agonise about the immorality of drinking it. Not about vampires who seek to rescue their soul from damnation, or wish to achieve the eternal rest denied to them.

In this game, vampires are constantly engaged in a violent physical struggle for power, respect and security. To avoid being a beaten-up loser, you need blood. You get blood by biting women you are intimate with. ‘Intimate’, as in ‘love’. Only for you, it’s not love anymore – for you, it’s ruthless exploitation. The question is: can you exploit enough women to survive?

Make up a vampire. He must be male, and he must have pointy teeth. The rest is up to you.

If you’re ready, if you’re serious, make yourself as a vampire. (Unless you are a woman. In which case, make your identical twin brother as a vampire.) But if you’re not ready, I won’t hold it against you.

Then, make up an environment. There must be other vampires, ready to fight you over something. What is that something? Power? Prestige? The favour of the King? The right to exhort the most shopkeepers in the neighbourhood? The possession of the most beautiful women? It’s all up to you: time, place, technology, the supernatural.

You can also start out with one or more women, if you wish.

2 Scenes and society

You are a vampire. That means you are a tough, blood-sucking fiend, trying to stay on top in an environment of harsh competition and desperate victims. Whether you place your game in a contemporary slum full of street gangs and drugs dealers or at a medieval court populated by sorcerers and servant girls, everyone you'll meet will fall into one of the following three categories.

Vampires: Your fellow vampires are your peers, the only one's whose respect matters, and the only ones capable of putting you down and humiliating you. The world of vampires is one of fierce competition, as you vie for power and prestige. You can fight your enemies by any means you wish, but in the end all conflicts tend to be decided by physical violence. In order to win those fights, vampires need blood – and that is why women are important to them.

Women: The female members of the human race are the vampire's only source of sustenance. They need to drink women's blood in order to be strong and healthy enough to count in vampiric society. But not the blood of any woman will do: only the blood of a woman with whom the vampire is intimate, who *loves* him – in whatever twisted way – can give him strength. So you must make women love you. But what woman could love a vampire? You'll find that pain goes a long way to ensure their intimacy.

Others: There are men who are not vampires. There are women who are not loved by vampires. They are nothing. They are as feeble as flies, as worthless as the dung beneath your boots. You can kill them without effort; they cannot harm you. The Others are moving scenery, much like the clouds in the sky.

Vampires is a scene based game. This means that every player will get a scene in turn, anywhere between – say – five and fifteen minutes in length. There are two kinds of scenes: *conflict scenes* and *intimate scenes*. Conflict scenes are about you meeting other vampires. They tend to end violently, with one of you victorious. Intimate scenes are about you visiting the women that love, loved or will love you. They tend to end violently, with *you* victorious. The player initiates every scene, by stating what he wishes to do. ‘I want to visit my girlfriend Marketa’ – that will be an intimate scene. ‘I want to accuse Archibald of treachery before the king’ – that will be a conflict scene. ‘I want to unexpectedly visit my girlfriend Marketa, only to find out that she’s sleeping with another vampire’ – that’s a conflict scene that, if won, might well lead to an intimate scene afterwards. Choose what best fits your character’s story, or your own morbid tastes.

3 Vampires: Blood and battle

In a *conflict scene*, you will invariably meet other vampires. They are your enemies. Even your friends are merely enemies that have decided to hold back for a while because of some mutual interest. Vampires are incapable of loyalty, friendship and love. And they are all playing a huge and violent zero sum game.

Play the scene until you can identify a conflict with another vampire. In a conflict, something is at stake. What is at stake is not something like ‘I hit him in the face’, or ‘his bullet fails to hit me’. Stakes are things like ‘I humiliate him in front of the entire court’, ‘I make sure that he does not steal my girlfriend’ or ‘I escape from the raging mob of enemies’. The stakes are what the conflict is *about*. Make sure that everyone understand what is at stake. Then, the *blood battle* begins.

Each vampire has a blood pool, with a number of blood points in it. We will see in the next section how you fill this blood pool; for now, we will concentrate on using it.

A *blood battle* is fought in rounds. Make sure that all players know how much points both sides have in their blood pool. Each round, both vampires roll some number – their choice – of six-sided dice. These dice are bought at the cost of one point for one die: for each die a character rolls, he must subtract one point from his blood pool. (He cannot roll more dice than he has blood points.) After the dice are rolled, discard all dice which came up 5 or 6. The sum total of the rest of the dice determines which character wins the round. In the case of a tie, the player and the GM collaboratively describe what happens and immediately start a new round.

The character that loses a round has the choice between giving up and accepting the outcome of the conflict, or initiating a new round of the blood battle. Whenever a character gives up, the conflict is resolved in favour of the other character; that character’s player may narrate the outcome. In addition, the following rules are in effect:

- When a character that has lost one round in the course of the blood battle initiates a new round, his adversary gets one bonus die. This bonus die remains until the end of the battle.
- When a character that has lost two rounds in the course of the blood battle initiates a new round, his adversary gets a second bonus die until the end of the battle. In addition, the character must heighten the stakes of the conflict in such a way that he is in greater danger. So if the stakes were ‘I humiliate him in front of the entire court, or

he'll get away without a scratch', they might become 'I humiliate him in front of the entire court, or he'll humiliate me'.

- When a character has lost three rounds in the course of the blood battle, he can no longer initiate a new round. He has lost. In addition, his adversary may roll one die, and transfer that many blood points (up to the total number of blood points the loser still has) to his own blood pool. Here, 5's and 6's are not discarded.

Each round, the winner of the round may describe what happens. Make it violent. Make it physical. Make it humiliating. Make it over the top. But remember that there is one limit on the outcomes of blood battles: *vampires cannot die*. They can get their hearts ripped out, and keep moving. They can get burnt to ashes, and return. Find a level of graphic violence that suits you and your group, and remember: if you don't do it to them, they will do it to you.

By the way. Normal people are unimportant. Kill them whenever you wish. But you can't touch the women of other vampires, unless they're part of the stakes, or you're in an intimate scene with them.

4 Women: Intimacy and violence

In an *intimate scene*, you'll invariably be concerned with some woman or another. This can be a woman with whom you are intimate, in which case you'll wish to manipulate her or drink her blood. But it can also be a woman you're not intimate with, in which case you'll wish to become intimate with her – perhaps at the cost of another vampire.

What you have understand above all is this: you are a cruel, callous monster. You have pointed teeth. You drink blood. No woman in her right mind would want to be with you. So you will have to make sure they are not in their right mind.

Intimacy and blood

Each woman has a shared attribute with you: your intimacy. This attribute is presented by a number between 0 and 5, where 0 is the default and 5 is the maximum. You can increase intimacy by dating a woman, having a conversation about personal issues, taking her out to a romantic dinner, making love, or in any other number of ways. You can increase your intimacy with a woman by a maximum of one point per scene. You cannot do this more than once per day. You can do it with women who are intimate with other vampires, but the total intimacy score can never be more than 5. Subtract one from the intimacy with another vampire if the total would otherwise exceed 5.

Each woman also has a single tears score. This is what makes her stay with you, where a normal person would have left you long ago. There are three tears scores: pain, self-loathing and despair. When you start seducing a woman, choose whether you will bind her to you through pain, self-loathing or despair. The intimacy you have with a woman can never be higher than her tears score.

You can drink a woman's blood once a day, with the only effect being that she feels weaker and more tired than normal. If a woman is bitten twice on the same day, she'll collapse and be weak for at least a week. Three bites will kill her.

When you drink a woman's blood, you may add your intimacy squared in blood points to your blood pool, to a maximum blood pool of 50.

Pain: the first game

Sometimes, the best way to protect yourself from the aversion that women naturally feel for you, is to ensure that she doesn't recognise your being a

vampire. You can do this by focusing all her attention on her own Pain.

So Pain, which would include confusion, betrayal, fear, and actual injuries, interferes with her ability to understand your nature. It will also make her try to forget her own miseries.

Whenever you visit her, roll a number of six-sided equal to her Pain. Each 5 or 6 counts as a success. If you have one success, she has tried to forget her pain through a minor distraction, such as watching TV all night and eating five bars of chocolate, or drinking eight cans of beer in an hour. If you have two successes, she has tried to forget her pain through a more major distraction, such as using hard drugs or having sex with a random stranger. If you have three or more successes, she has tried to forget her pain through a huge distraction, such as using heroine or drinking two liters of whisky. It's up to you what the effects are. Describe what she has done before the scene commences.

Her Pain is what you make it.

Self-loathing: the second game

Another tactic is to make her believe that she is a monster herself, and thus deserves no better man than you. This is done by instilling her with a strong sense of self-loathing.

So Self-loathing, which would include her sense of guilt, of worthlessness and weakness as well as her disgust at the relationship she has allowed to continue for so long, makes her accept you as her due. It also makes her do terrible things, since she sees herself as a monster.

Whenever you visit her, roll a number of six-sided equal to her Self-loathing. Each 5 or 6 counts as a success. If you have one success, she has done a minor terrible thing, like shoplifting or hitting her child. If you have two successes, she has done a medium terrible thing, like beating up her child or setting fire to a building. If you have three or more successes, she has done something truly terrible, such as murder. Describe what she has done before the scene commences.

Her Self-loathing is what you make it.

Despair: the third game

The third way to keep a woman from leaving you is by making her believe that leaving you will not bring a change for the better. You must make her despair of ever attaining a better life.

So Despair, which is an all-encompassing feeling of hopelessness concerning each and every possibility of happiness, will ensure that she undertakes no actions to find a better life. It will also make her try and commit suicide.

Whenever you visit her, roll a number of six-sided equal to her Despair. Each 5 or 6 counts as a success. If you have one success, she has expressed her despair in a non-self-destructive way, such as writing tragic poetry or crying all night. If you have two successes, she has expressed her despair in a slightly self-destructive way, such as cutting her arm with a razor. If you have three or more successes, she has seriously tried to commit suicide. Whether she died or not is your choice. Describe what she has done before your scene commences.

Her Despair is what you make it.

Ruthless manipulation

How do you make her Self-loathing, Despair or Pain anything? Play the scene. Describe what you say and do in order to make her feel the appropriate emotion. You can make it as physical or as psychological as you wish. Also state the score you are aiming for (a number between 0 and 5).

Now, all the other players and the GM get to vote. They'll give you a score between 0 and 5. Take the average, rounded up. Either this number or the score you aimed for is the woman's new score, whichever is the *lower*. The other players and the GM should use the following table as they vote:

- 0:** I like my lover to act like that.
- 1:** I would not like my lover to act like that, but could easily forgive him or her if he or she did.
- 2:** That was pretty evil, but still within my comfort zone.
- 3:** That was terrible. This roleplaying experience is reaching the borders of my comfort zone.
- 4:** That was really bad. I feel uncomfortable playing this game.
- 5:** I had not expected to hear something that disturbing in the context of this game.

It is absolutely *vital* for the success of the game that scoring happens with reference to the actual feelings of discomfort of the players. If you are simply having fun and enjoying the tale, don't score above 2. *Vampires* is designed to transcend the borders of fun.

5 Rules for the GameMaster

This section is not called ‘advice for the GameMaster’, because it is not advice. The following are *rules*, and should not be strayed from in any circumstances. Adherence to them will make or break the game.

Goals and movement

In every roleplaying game, you will wish to avoid situations where everybody sits wondering “What shall we do now?” *Vampires* is no exception. As the GameMaster, it is your task to drive the game ever forward by giving the player characters a dynamic world to which they will have to react. The precise nature of this world depends on the setting chosen at the start of the game, and should be discussed with the players. Perhaps each vampire tries to be the boss in a downtown slum, in which case there may be rival gangs to deal with, drug deals need to be made, and out-of-town vampires trying to take over their business to be repelled. Or perhaps each vampire tries to be the favourite of the cruel vampire king, in which case there may be bloody intrigue, duels and deadly poisons. You, as the GameMaster, have to make sure that there is always something to do in the game world connected to the goal all the vampires strive to attain. Your big friend is adversity.

Relentless adversity

The position of each player should *always* be threatened. If he is doing well in establishing his criminal empire, several of his enemies team up to get him down. If he becomes the most beloved in the eyes of the king, a very powerful old friend of the king turns up. If the character lies broken and bloody in the gutter, something is about to happen that will make his life even worse. The adversity is always there, and it is always real.

It is impossible for any vampire ever to attain a secure position. If that seems to happen, increase the adversity. The player characters should always be balancing on the edge of a sword, now winning, now losing, and always needing to exploit women in order to remain standing. There is no security.

Playing the vampires

All vampires hate each other. They may team up, but will betray their ‘friends’ without second thoughts. In addition, none of them feels love, and all ruthlessly exploit the women they feed from. So, that’s their psychology for you. Oh, and they love to take away each other’s women.

As for the game mechanics, the most important thing about a vampire is his or her blood pool. Write the blood pool of every vampire down, and be sure to let the player know how much blood a rival has at the start of a blood battle. A vampire with a blood pool of 10 is a weak enemy; one with

a blood pool of 25 a strong enemy; a vampire with a blood pool of 50 is a fearsome enemy; and those rare individuals with a blood pool greater than 50 points are markedly stronger than the player characters at their best. Changing the size of the blood pools allows you to give the players exactly the amount of adversity they require.

Playing the women

The women are helpless victims, dominated by the vampires. That doesn't mean they don't struggle: many do, fiercely. It only means that they consistently lose.

It is extremely important that you remember this: unlike the vampires, the women in *Vampires* are actual people. They have feelings. They are capable of feeling love. Their misery is meaningful. You and the players should *care* about them. Once you reduce the women to mere caricatures, the game is lost. Love them. Hurt them. See them die. That is the story.

6 Designer's notes

This is not a roleplaying game about vampires. Oh, there are vampires in it, I'll grant you that – but they are merely a fictional device for addressing the real issue. This is a roleplaying game about the destructive power of male domination. It is about how rivalry and senseless struggles for power and prestige undermine and destroy the bonds of love. It is about the reasons people have for not quitting a dysfunctional relationship.

This is also a roleplaying game about the ability of the players to think up cold and cruel actions. When all around the table look at you with horror after you've disclosed some particularly vile way of hurting your loved ones, you know you're playing it right. Whether that makes this game utterly perverse, or a celebration of the powers of love that separate our imagination from our actions, is up to you.

You may have wondered about the possibility of reaching a happy end with this game, if not for the vampires, then at least for the women involved. That possibility does not exist: they can never break out of the circle of pain and despair. It is forbidden by the game rules.

Think about that.

I mean, *really* think about it, and play the game.

7 Salutations

The one and only reason this game exists is Vincent Baker, and his game *Hungry, Desperate and Alone*. Hell, the current document even contains actual sentences from that game. I would like to thank him for allowing me to keep those in.

The 0-5 voting scale was inspired in a major way by Ethan Greer's frightening little game *Chamber*. I haven't played it, nor do I dare to.

My Life with Master showed me for the first time how you can incorporate a theme in an RPG, and taught me scene-based roleplaying besides. Hence, its indirect influence on this design is large.

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