

ON VAMPIRES  
an explanatory essay

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## Fair warning

This is a small essay on my roleplaying game *Vampires*. It serves two purposes: to explain what I had in mind in designing it, and to persuade those who feel that only a monster could have written such a horrible game that, well, perhaps things aren't so black and white. But before you read any further, please know that doing so will ensure that you can never play *Vampires* again as it was meant to be played. It is designed to give you an experience which you can no longer have after reading this essay. So, please decide whether you wish to try out the game, or rather read *about* it.

## 1 Self-referentiality

The only real characters in *Vampires*, the only ones who are truly human, are not the player characters, but the women whom they exploit. These women are trapped in a circle of pain, sorrow and helplessness. Escape from this circle is impossible because of ‘destructive male domination’, the merciless relations of power that determine the life story of every being in the fictional world.

The *players* of *Vampires* can only tell one single kind of story: the bleak and awful kind of story which is forced upon them by the rules of the game. They constantly have to step outside their own comfort zone, they have ‘to transcend the boundaries of fun’, without any recompense: they are trapped in a circle of disgust and helplessness. Escape from this circle is impossible because of the rules, which disallow any and all positive changes in the fictional world. Being written by a man, we might go as far as characterising the rules of *Vampires* as ‘destructive male domination’.

Is it possible for the women in *Vampires* to revolt against their fate and the vampires, and change their lives for the better? No – not as long as the players keep to the rules. In other words, as long as the players do not break the power of the rules, as long as they take a submissive stance towards them, the women cannot break the iron grip of the vampires. But *if* the players *were* to overthrow the rules, the women could also overthrow the vampires.

The contents of the fictional world in *Vampires* are one large metaphor for the game session itself. The players, contrary to first appearances, are not to be identified with the vampires they play – they are the equivalent of the women. They are in the same situation, and their respective releases can only be achieved jointly.

## 2 The intended experience

Playing *Vampires*, then, is intended to be a process of increasing alienation and disgust. Alienation from the player character which one has to play, but whom one cannot identify with – this game strives for the *exact opposite* of ‘immersive’ play. Disgust for the story, and especially for the ruthless exploitation of the only characters the players *can* identify with. Everything in the game – especiall the transcending of the comfort zone – is meant to increase these two emotions. And it is very, very explicit that there is no hope of escape – within the confines of the rules.

The intended result of this is open player rebellion. The moment one of the

players says: “I don’t care what it says in the rules, Mary grabs a shotgun from under her bed and blows his fucking head off! And hell is he going to *stay* dead!”, is the moment that the aim of *Vampires* has been achieved. I think it would be wonderful to experience the liberation that goes with such a decision – but as is now apparent, one who knows what *Vampires* is about cannot experience it any more.

### 3 Responsibility and the Lumpley Principle

Playing *Vampires* may bring the players to the realisation that *everything* that happens in a roleplaying game happens because the players have agreed to it. The players, and only the players, are responsible for what goes on in the game world, because they are the only ones with the power to decide what is, and what is not entered into the Shared Imagined Space. The players are responsible, and they have to take that responsibility: this is the moral equivalent of the Lumpley Principle. Responsibility cannot be transferred to the rules.

*Vampires*, then, is a game about itself and about roleplaying in general. It is about responsibility and the submission to power. Rather than being immoral or amoral, I believe *Vampires* to be one of the most powerfully moral roleplaying games that have yet been developed.

### 4 The practical problem

There is of course a practical problem. It might well be the case that the kind of people who would actually care enough about the women of the story to revolt in order to save them, are also the kind of people that are so repulsed by the *prima facie* unredeemed cruelty of *Vampires* that they will never start playing it. Perhaps this game will never be played until the point of revolt, for what players willfully push themselves so far? These problems also make it exceedingly difficult to have the game playtested.

But even if *Vampires* fails, for these reasons, as a roleplaying game, it may still succeed as a piece of conceptual art, or as a statement on the ethics of roleplaying.