

UNWINNABLE PRESENTS

# Vampires

pure & otherwise

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*welcome to volume ten, issue ten of*

**UNWINNABLE**  

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**magazine**

OCTOBER 2023

UNWINNABLE MONTHLY

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ISSN 2572-5572

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Dear Reader,

When I first imagined *Vamps (Pyre and Otherwise)* it was kind of a linguistic trick. I look at themes as a way to explore new things but also, I look towards the theme itself to be stretched. I wanted to create something that invited that. A theme that itself was meant to contain a kind of seductive element to it. “And otherwise” you say? Well, I don’t mind if I do!

Then came the vision of a cover. No more pretense, just a vision of a pulp styled Ava Gardner attempting to gun down Bela Lugosi. Maybe in the recesses of my mind there was a bit of the old “pirates vs. ninjas” debate. What would it be like to have sexy ladies fighting vampires, some of whom are sexy ladies in their own right! I also just think it’s really funny for someone to shoot normal bullets at a vampire and pulp covers rock.

But the more and more we hammered away at this, the more the dream of the civil war among the seducers began to falter. I’ve mentioned this before – I don’t like to call balls and strikes when it’s time to work on the theme. I much prefer to sit up here and be reflective. I enjoy getting to admire the ways that the theme was stretched. Instead, I found myself far in the trenches. Lestat to the left of me, Dracula to my right. Elvira nowhere in sight.

That’s not to say that the idea of stretching the theme didn’t work out. This theme got stretched. But, as any editor should tell you, you have to remember to give yourself room to be surprised by your writers. And surprise they did!

The war I was trying to engender really was me trying to take the idea of a “seducers theme month” to its most absurd heights. The vampire and the femme fatale aren’t opposites as much as they’re facets of a classical figure of a kind of siren. A danger that is irresistible. A being that beckons you ever closer to danger. An enthralling force, either through beauty, wealth, power or some other intangible. Vamps are the landlords and the capitalists. They contain a viral quality. Not industrious on their own but living off of the life force that lies in the wake of prosperity. But perhaps most of all, they’re *survivors*.

So, here we are. *Vamps (mostly): Pyre and Otherwise*.

Our theme feature is Elijah Gonzalez on deeply weird, capitalistic vampires that sit at the top of *Xenoblade Chronicles 3*. This piece is awesome and it anticipates the theme so beautifully.

Also in this issue, our regular contributors plus some special guests from the web and otherwise! Oluwatayo Adewole jazzes up the joint. Ruth Cassidy on just *Pyre*, ha! Jay Castello on the most vampiric act of consumption. Maddi Chilton combs the irradiated wastes of *Redfall*. Sara Clemens tells a short story about a late-evening walk. Deidre Coyle puts together the most important list in Hammer history. Orrin Grey hunts vampires with a little light. Emma Kostopolus loots and shoots her way through *Redfall*, is there an echo in here? Emily Price heads to the PNW. Justin Reeve goes to perpetually smokey, wet, dark London. Rob Rich remembers when he used to attend the masquerade. Levi Rubeck hunts for D. Phoenix Simms has learned much from those with fangs. Noah Springer takes the theme to the furthest possible point I would editorially tolerate. And Alyssa Wejebe turns into a giant-ass animal.

See you all in a few weeks in Exploits!

And this time, for us, remember Unwinnable's enduring, undying quality is because of readers like you. To our subscribers, we deeply appreciate you and your faith in us. Some of you have been with us from the beginning, some of you we've picked up along the way but to all of you, thank you.

And if this is the first time you're joining us, welcome! Unwinnable thrives because people like you subscribe, tell their friends about us, and sometimes even give the gift of Unwinnable to others. Just a thought and we'd love the chance to prove to you that keeping our light in the gathering storm lit brightly is worth it.

**David Shimomura**

*Chicago, Illinois*

*October 11, 2023*



PAST PRESENCE | **EMILY PRICE**

## TAKING THE CULLENS TO UNIQLO

A couple of months ago, I rewatched all the *Twilight* movies. I know I've seen them all before, but they kind of run together. The only one I remember seeing was *Eclipse*, which I saw in theaters for a friend's birthday in eighth grade. I was on team Jacob. I didn't realize Kristen Stewart was wearing a wig. The whole deal.

I liked *Twilight* when it came out, and though I like it less now, the first movie is actually interesting to me. *Eclipse* is the best one narratively speaking, but *Twilight* has its own charm because it feels like several movies someone stapled together. The lighting is wild, but what really stuck out to me on this rewatch were the costumes. Amongst a resurgence of 2000s fashion this year it was jarring to see people wearing those outfits, but without any retro sensibility or irony. For me, it conjured the bleak memory of boot cut jeans and jackets that only go down to your mid-waist. If you were in middle or high school in the late 2000s, I'm sure you have your own version.

I watched all the movies over about three weeks, forgot about them, and then, one night, I went scrolling on Uniqlo.

Uniqlo is a Japanese casual wear manufacturer which first opened stores in North America almost two decades ago. It's incredibly popular, being the top brand in China in 2021 and (at that time) in a position to overtake its two competitors, Zara and H&M, internationally. Most of its clothes are solid colors, and a lot of them use the textures of outdoor wear. If there's an art to dressing models top to bottom in your brand without making that fact obvious, Uniqlo hasn't mastered it. The models break up all the similar colors and textures with baseball hats and belts, like a ten-layer cake of Uniqlo.

I was there to buy some tights, which I always buy from Uniqlo even though they're not very sturdy (why I buy them every year). But I had to scroll through a few other sections first: dress pants, a crescent-moon bag I've thought about buying for over a year, long crinkly skirts. New sweaters don't drop until next month, so I skip those. Ultimately,



I ended up closing the tab without putting anything in my cart, but I know I'll be back once it's colder. Uniqlo has an allure equal to any other clothes retailer, but instead of "I want this, but where would I wear it" the refrain is "I want this and I'd wear it anywhere". My life isn't going to majorly change if I buy something from Uniqlo; at most it will make the things I already do slightly more bearable.

I remembered [this article](#) which argues Uniqlo clothes are "a neutral scaffolding with which to venture out into the world, a preset palette of aesthetics and narratives that is accessible and slightly interesting without being threatening." For the record, I like Uniqlo, even if some of their clothes are a little plasticky. But it's true: you can wear Uniqlo anywhere. Its styling is bizarre and frequently, ugly. I don't know of a better way to summarize *Twilight's* fashion.

That fashion gets a bad rap because it's a late example of 2000s dress code. But there's another major aspect that gets overlooked: it looks weird because it's PNW fashion. I went to college in Portland and grew up in Northern California before that. I know PNW fashion; I lived it. (See: 20% of my college having Camelbak backpacks.)

Bella is constantly in flannel and hoodies. They didn't even get her a good waffle knit; just long sleeve shirts with a keyhole neckline. She gets increasingly more feminine over the course of the movies, ending with her transformation into a glam vampire queen. Her outfits have ruffled sleeves or strange layering. Her style looks purposeful, but it communicates an outsider-ness about her character that, given the inconsistency of the series' writing, seems like it might not even be intentional.

Bella's fashion is why people still talk about the costuming in these movies. Her classmates are all more toned down (and, oddly, less obviously PNW) versions of her outfits, with layered tanks under polo shirts for the guys and short sleeve henleys for the girls. Jacob et al break the fashion barrier entirely (no shirts). The Cullen family's outfits, though, are in a different category. Even though the costumers clearly want to communicate each family member's personality through their clothes, they all look kind of samey. Astoundingly, [each main character had \\*six of each outfit\\*](#) (plus extras for stunt doubles!) so they had to shop at places where they could buy in bulk.

As some of my colleagues are writing about elsewhere in this issue, vampire clothes are flowy and dark, goth, cool. They are





counter-culture. But the vampires in *Twilight* are mainstream culture. They have to be. They shop at Abercrombie (before the renaissance) and Eileen Fisher. Even the Volturi, the big evil vampires that show up in the later movies, dress in black officiant's robes that are totally boring. Alice is the one exception to this, but she just goes down the street to Free People.

The Cullens are preppers, which is further underscored by their political leanings (I gasped when *Eclipse* reminded me Jasper was in the Confederate Army). They are unbothered by anything outside their sphere, which, to be fair to them, does include human-eating vampires trying to take over their vegetarian territory. Still, it's such a provincial issue that the later movies really have to raise the stakes and make the morality ever more black and white – these guys are the bad vampires, promise! – so that the little ambiguity that was in the previous films falls away.

While I like Kristen Stewart's outfits in the last movie, and I'd probably rather wear them than whatever's going on in the first two, they lose some charm for me. They communicate that she's a vampire lady now, not a girl, providing visual evidence of her personal growth. Bella herself did grow on me, and she's the best acted main character

in the final movies bar none. But as her fashion gets more adult, it also conforms to the vampire style I was just talking about: not as preppy, but more just basic. Every outfit has the same v-neck + tight fitting silhouette.

Vampire style is basics on basics. It's neutral colors and inoffensive accessories. Vampire ideology, in the *Twilight* universe, is similarly logical and mechanistic. Bella marries into a family which is first posed as counter-culture and then reveals itself to be conservative as the movies go on. The Cullens don't want anything to change. They want to exist on the fringes of human society, to avoid pissing off Big Vampire and to keep their nice house.

In order to fit in, Bella has to conform while insisting, over and over, that she's still her own person. This offers up a more pessimistic, and more interesting, reading of some of the scenes in *Breaking Dawn*, where a violently sick Bella ensures her (reasonably!) worried dad that she's not being trafficked or abused. (For the record, though Bella has the most interesting fashion in the series, the award for best fashion has to go to Charlie.) We see her comforting people by insisting that she's informed enough about the choice she made, and in a series that almost never lets Bella be the last word



on a subject, everyone surprisingly just kind of gives up.


I think the movies want us to interpret this as a moment of agency, finally, for Bella, but it came across more to me as a form of hetero-pessimism. In the first movie, Bella opines about how unpopular she is to what becomes a hilarious degree since everyone at her school seems to love her. In the later ones, she spends all her energy thinking about her love triangle. Her main point of agency is just acquiescing to something that was out of her control to begin with; her single-minded goal to become part of this family stops being silly and starts feeling self-destructive.

I'm not saying *Twilight* itself believes this. But it foreshadows it in dress, in Stewart's heavy eye makeup and the pregnancy CGI, and most of all in her transition to a more basic, more adult style. Bella is growing up. Or, Bella is being absorbed into a machine.

*Twilight* is formed around the old chestnut that you become more conservative as you get older, repackaged as a little crunchy, a little sexy, but still ending in babies and a house, even if you do vampire hunts on the weekend. Its fashion crosses some lines, especially when it comes to the first and last movies, but ultimately it snaps back. Like the

controversial [ending of \*Girls\*](#), we have a heroine who chooses a life that seems at odds with what she actually desires. Both these franchises position the turn towards motherhood as, if not desirable, at least natural. But in the case of *Twilight*, that turn also comes with an undercurrent of wrongness. Bella resists the normative, but it comes for her anyway. What could be scarier than that?

I think if you made *Twilight* in 2023, Esme and her husband (it's Carlisle, I just had to google it) would wear Uniqlo cashmere. The brand contains multitudes, the basic slacks and v neck sweaters you could wear to the office, but also the lime green A-line dress or the shackets that come in fourteen colors. Even so, you can only get so wild with Uniqlo. To stand out, eventually you'll have to add something of your own. But for *Twilight*-core, this is exactly the point: blending in and being normative to the point of unrecognizability. That, not inner darkness, is where the horror comes out.

Allegedly, [Twilight fashion](#) is back, by which I think people just mean lace trim and low-rise jeans. Maybe that means they're going to do an adaptation of *Midnight Sun* or something. If they do, Bella might be in mom jeans, but Edward will be wearing 3D knit. 



THIS MORTAL COYLE | **DEIRDRE COYLE**

## HAMMER HORROR NIGHTGOWN RANKING

If you're here in the Unwinnable universe, you're probably familiar with Hammer Films. The legendary British production company is best known for their streak of Gothic horror movies released from the 1950s to the 1970s. These movies are very popular amongst goths, vampire enthusiasts, sexploitation fans and Anglophiles, so you can imagine how frequently I watch them. While Hammer Films are often praised for their lush set design and incredible casting (Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee are all over the place), one element of Hammer's legacy deserves more love: nightgowns.

It's easy to get lost in the aesthetic pleasures of Hammer's smooching Draculas and [bangin' 1970s haircuts on 19th century characters](#); you might gloss over the more ethereal wardrobe choices. So, I'm here to provide you with my personal ranking of the best nightgowns Hammer Horror has to offer.

### 10. *Mademoiselle Perrodot* (Kate O'Mara)'s nightgown in *The Vampire Lovers* (1970)

*The Vampire Lovers* (1970), the first in Hammer's Karnstein Trilogy, is based on J. Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella, *Carmilla*, about a lesbian vampire. I will tell you right now that I am going to overrepresent the Karnstein Trilogy in this list, because *they have a lot of nightgowns and every one of them is straight fire*. Let us begin with the nightgown of a more minor character, the governess Mademoiselle Perrodot (Kate O'Mara). One night, Perrodot hears her ward, Emma (Madeline Smith), scream. (Note: We are talking about nightgowns in horror movies, so get ready for a lot of women waking up screaming.) Perrodot runs to Emma's side wearing a mostly transparent white nightgown with very subtle lace bordering the neckline. This is not the best nightgown of the film, but we will get there.



**9. Laura (Pippa Steel)'s nightgown in *The Vampire Lovers* (1970)**

Laura (Pippa Steel) wakes, screaming, from a nightmare of a giant cat. Her white nightgown features delicate eyelet lace with a light blue ribbon around the neck. This is also not the best nightgown of the film, but it's pretty solid.

**8. Lucy (Carol Marsh)'s nightgown in *Dracula* (1958)**

In *Dracula* (1958, released in the U.S. as *Horror of Dracula*), Lucy (Carol Marsh) wears a high-necked, button-down blue nightie with long, puffed sleeves and eyelet lace trimming the collar. This is demure for a Hammer nightgown, and thus provides the perfect cover for Lucy to sweetly bid her family goodnight, then remove the crucifix from her neck and welcome Christopher Lee's Dracula into her bedroom.

**7. Countess Dracula (Ingrid Pitt)'s lace robe in *Countess Dracula* (1971)**

17th century Countess Nádasdy (Ingrid Pitt) bathes in virgin blood and [spins around in a blue lace robe](#). Does a robe count as a nightgown? I vote yes. While there is, sadly, no

actual vampirism in this movie, we still have fine sleepwear to gaze upon.

**6. Maria (Mary Collinson)'s nightgown in *Twins of Evil* (1971)**

*Twins of Evil* is the final installment in Hammer's Karnstein trilogy, and stars identical twins and one-time *Playboy* Playmates Mary and Madeleine Collinson. The story follows Maria (Mary Collinson) and her sister Frieda (Madeleine Collinson). In the [original theatrical trailer](#), over a shot of the Collinsons in their nightgowns, the narrator says, "Two identical beauties – but one of them has the very devil in her."

**5. Frieda (Madeleine Collinson)'s nightgown in *Twins of Evil* (1971)**

See above.

**4. Carmilla (Yutte Stensgaard)'s purple nightgown in *Lust for a Vampire* (1971)**

In the second installation of the Karnstein Trilogy, Carmilla (Yutte Stensgaard) wears several incredible nightgowns, but I will limit myself to the best: a sleeveless lavender gown with a dark purple ribbon encircling its Empire waist. Carmilla wears this while



strolling through the cemetery at night, as one should.

**3. Emma (Madeline Smith)'s nightgown in *The Vampire Lovers* (1970)**

Like Laura (Pippa Steel) before her, Emma (Madeline Smith) wakes, screaming, from a nightmare of a giant cat. She leans forward as she screams, and while one might (understandably) focus on her considerable décolletage, she also reveals a lovely square-necked white nightgown lined with puffed sleeves, ruffles and a pink ribbon. Charming!

**2. Carmilla (Ingrid Pitt)'s nightgown in *The Vampire Lovers* (1970)**

Later in *The Vampire Lovers*, Emma chats with the mysterious Carmilla (played this time by Ingrid Pitt) while wearing her aforementioned square-necked nightie. Carmilla's nightgown is a low scoop-necked affair with ruching above its Empire waistline. Emma mentions a handsome man, and Carmilla gets jealous: "You chat on like an old peasant woman sometimes," Carmilla says, "always of death and tragedy!" She storms to the open window and stares at the full moon, white nightgown glowing in the moonlight.


**1. Isobel (Yvonne Furneaux)'s nightgown in *The Mummy* (1959)**

My personal favorite nightgown appears in Hammer's 1959 film *The Mummy*, starring Peter Cushing as archaeologist John Banning, Yvonne Furneaux as his wife Isobel and Christopher Lee as the Mummy. In the movie's most aesthetically satisfying scene, Isobel swans into her husband's study wearing a wafting lavender gauze contraption. As John stares into Isobel's eyes, he realizes she bears a striking resemblance to the Egyptian high priestess whose tomb his archaeological team desecrated years before (thanks, colonialism!). "[The high priestess] was considered the most beautiful woman in the world," John says.

"I am flattered," says Isobel.

"Mind you, the world wasn't so big then," John adds (rude).

"Oh, don't spoil it all."

Personally, no matter how big the world is or was, I do not believe there could be anyone more beautiful than a person in Hammer sleepwear. Truly, these nightgowns are the unsung heroines of Hammer Films. 



MIND PALACES | MADDI CHILTON

## I WILL COME UP WITH A PUNNY TITLE I PROMISE

Earlier this year, Arkane Studios released their highly-anticipated vampire hunting videogame *Redfall*. It did not do very well. The general consensus seems to have been that Arkane, who are best known for the *Dishonored* series, were out of their depth building a multiplayer shooter; based on the response to a recent leak regarding the possibility of a *Dishonored 3*, *Redfall*'s abrupt bombing seems to have been quickly and cleanly brushed under the rug. With any hope, Arkane will go back to what they're good at (folks seem to be saying) and we can move past this unpleasant episode as quickly as possible.

Perhaps what doomed *Redfall* is that Arkane has a very strong house style. Generally, this is considered a good thing! Fans of the *Dishonored* series tend to be devotees, and *Prey* and *Deathloop* were seen as innovative experiments on the beloved – and functional – formula of a "classic Arkane game." *Redfall* was not. *Redfall* borrowed from a very different playbook, the expansive

space and infinite lists that we're more used to seeing from Ubisoft. *Redfall* ended up as a game primarily about shooting very similar guns at very similar enemies while following a map marker to a waypoint. There was a story in there somewhere, and in *Redfall*'s defense the bones of that story were perfectly fine; city pulled out of time, vampiric menace hollowing it out, some loose critique of capitalism, some vague story about community coming together to rescue it all. There's even a competent, and occasionally impressive, world to set it in – the receding waters of the bay and the massive waves cresting around the game world are genuinely beautiful and foreboding – but where the *Dishonored* games prioritized interesting interaction with their world above all else, *Redfall* makes it nothing but set decoration.

It wouldn't have been as bad if it had just been an experiment that didn't click. Games take risks all the time, and some work out better than others – sometimes a great game will go unappreciated by critics or be finan-



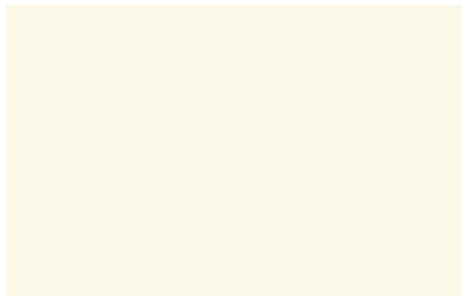
cially unsuccessful, and sometimes a game that's honestly pretty mid will end up raking in the cash. It's the specific type of uninventive that *Redfall* ended up being that was so disappointing. Everything that felt wrong about it was something we've seen before in the massive blockbusters that dominate the news cycles of gaming these days – the *Far Cry*s, the *Assassin's Creeds*, the *Battlefields* and *Destinys*. They didn't try anything new at all, they did something that's been done before, many times, and they did it worse. It points to a worrying instinct towards homogenization in games of this size, one that I would earlier have thought Arkane was free from.

I don't think that it's true that studios should only make one type of game. Simply saying that different studios should stick with what they're good at discourages risk-taking and innovation. But I do think that somewhere along the way in *Redfall*'s development someone should have asked: What is this game, and why are we making it? That is the big unanswered question, for me, coming into *Redfall* from the rest of Arkane's oeuvre. I simply don't see the point of it.

It's a shame to see a studio like Arkane release a game that feels so far removed from their usual modus operandi in such an uninteresting way. They've spent a decade releasing unique, interesting games with a strong individual design ethos, and then showed us a half-baked *Far Cry* copycat and expected it to land – something went very

wrong there. I hope *Redfall*'s mistakes don't dissuade other studios from taking risks or trying something new, but I do hope it shows them that what people want is not a blind embrace of *bigger, quicker, more*, but thoughtful and interesting evolutions of the lessons learned in earlier games.

The games industry feels like it's expanding and contracting simultaneously. Games are getting exponentially more massive, companies are swelling in size, and at the same time the wideness and diversity of games seems to be narrowing. I'm compelled to clarify that this isn't actually true: more people are making games than ever, and indie scenes are vibrant. But it's not hard to see why it might feel that way! Small studios are getting swallowed and spit up, independent publishers are ballooning in size and goal until they bear little resemblance to what they were when they started. I have a feeling this is why *Redfall*'s mid-ness struck such a nerve; we saw a lively studio that makes beautiful games with the life sucked out of it, a cold bloodless shell of the games we used to love. Hopefully a fluke, on Arkane's part. Hopefully just a small misstep. But unsettlingly close to an omen. 🍀





HERE BE MONSTERS | DR. EMMA KOSTOPOLUS

## A DIFFERENT SORT OF VAMPIRE: THE ENDEMIC ISSUE BEHIND REDFALL'S CRITICAL FLOP

If you blinked in May of 2023, you were likely to miss it: Arkane Austin released their open world vampire looter-shooter *Redfall* to immediate critical and audience panning, and now, a paltry four months later, the game (still selling for \$69.99) has a 24-hour peak of only 30 players on Steam, with under six hours of median playtime.

The justifications for this utter rejection are many: critics and players had valid complaints about mechanical bugs and glitches within the game on launch, that often-made parts of the experience unplayable. There were also discussions of the repetitive nature of several of the missions – after a few hours, it felt like the same rote objectives were being recycled over and over. What this did, ultimately, was create an experience that made it difficult for audiences to find the fun, and the game has now all but disappeared from the landscape.

But none of that, I argue, is actually a good reason for *Redfall* to have disappeared.

While the game was quite flawed at launch, this can be said of the vast majority of games, with the concept of the Day One Patch now ubiquitous. Further, many games released by parent company Bethesda Softworks remain buggy in substantial ways in perpetuity – people still find great glee in discovering glitches and bugs in the *Fallout* franchise, for example. While some games are so buggy as to make playing the game more frustrating than fun (pour one out here for the launch of *Cyberpunk 2077*, which hard-crashed my PS5 multiple times), I no longer understand why players pick up a game on launch, find it flawed and then abandon it permanently, when they know for a fact that there are whole teams of people dedicated to post-launch support and improvement. I picked *Redfall* up for the first time just a few weeks ago, and I found it






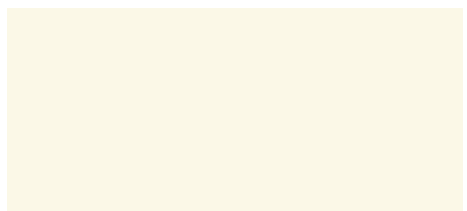
to be a relatively smooth play experience – no major issues across any of my play sessions. This is even more of an applicable point when, with the ubiquity of GamePass Day One Launches, people are now no longer paying full market price for new releases a lot of the time, so there's very little buyer's remorse involved.

The other main complaint, repetitive quests in the open-world environment, also doesn't justify the universal disdain for *Redfall*. Do a lot of the quests have a procedurally-generated feel to them? Of course. Such is the lot of any persistent open-world experience. The issue here is that this complaint seems, in a way, unique to this game, and is not levied at other games that do this exact thing in equal or greater measure. All you have to do to see my point is to play around an hour of any *Destiny* content (sorry not sorry to fans). What is loved in one place is reviled in another.

So, what's my point here, other than a generalized defense of the vampire game in the vamp(fire) issue? I believe that *Redfall* is an excellent test case for how capitalist gamer culture has turned some gaming consumers into a particularly odious, never-satisfied group of soulsuckers that game developers are forced to kowtow to. In other words, vampires. Mechanical issues like those that happen with *Redfall* occur because of toxic

crunch culture, which occurs because the consumer base constantly clamors for shiny new toys at beyond the speed of light, and game devs regularly receive death threats for things like announcing project delays. The gamers help create the conditions for shoddy game releases and then throw fits because devs could not do the impossible. Capitalism, at its heart, tells us that we can demand miracles at the bargain price of the health and wellbeing of the worker, and gamers appear to have swallowed this idea whole.

So, in a nutshell, mainstream games crit has gone entirely off the rails because of the customer-service model of gaming that turns a piece of media art into a transaction whose quality is assessed via opaque and ever-shifting standards by a mass of folks who may or may not have any idea that they're being hypocritical. Do I recognize the irony and elitism inherent in someone with a Ph.D in Digital Rhetoric making this claim in an independent media crit venue? Of course. Am I going to say it anyway? Yes. Both because I feel this is an important point to make and because my other option for this month was writing about (gag) *Castlevania*. 





INTERLINKED | PHOENIX SIMMS

## DON'T FEAR THE REAVER

I grew up in a world of vampires. That sounds intense and gothic, but I assure you, it was actually quite mundane. Comforting even, in a strange way. Vampires were some of my most sincere tutors, even when they thought they were being mysterious and deceptive. Lestat and Louis taught me about the complexity of morality. Simon (of the criminally underrated YA novel *The Silver Kiss*) taught me about loneliness and mortality and how neither of those were as scary as being caught in a purgatory. Especially one of your own making.

Meier Link taught me that sometimes those who call themselves righteous protectors can be just as cruel and predatory. Vamps and Dhampirs had the potential to be in some instances, if not heroes, then anti-heroes at least (as tired as that category of protagonist may seem today). And as such Blade and D taught me to reflect on what makes people label others as monsters and to [be wary of how you internalize your sense of alterity](#). Practically every woman vampire I encountered taught me, from Lucy and Dracula's wives to Carmilla and Akasha (portrayed

best by the radiant Aaliyah, may she rest in peace) that embracing your differences can be your source of strength. The vamps of *What We Do in the Shadows* (both the movie and tv series, though I'm more familiar with the former) taught me not to take myself so seriously and spend more quality time with friends and loved ones.

Above all vamps have taught me that any relationship I enter, whether familial, platonic, romantic or otherwise, has the potential to drain me if I'm not aware of my limits or boundaries. Both physically and mentally. Although the classic sanguine tales of vampires are fascinating to me, I've more often been drawn to the emotional beats of any vampire story. Some vamps don't just drink your blood, they can siphon your energy too. Sometimes they even steal or change your soul. These types, both in and outside of folkloric spheres, are referred to as psychic or energy vampires.

I think many of us recognize a psychic/energy vampire when encountered with one, but they're usually not definable by shared



physical characteristics (although [this humorous old article](#) from the golden age of *Twilight* claims otherwise). Even Colin Robinson of the aforementioned *What We Do in the Shadows* tv series and his fellow energy vamps are physically cast as the most nondescript pedants of society. Most sources describe energy vampires primarily by their [psychological profile](#) as individuals who drain you of your emotional energy and who saddle you with their emotional labor. In other words, such vamps are chiefly identifiable by the toxic feelings they evoke and by the exhausted aftermath of putting up with their antics. Another commonly stated characteristic is that they are not always intentionally hurting others, including those close to them.

The metaphorical language surrounding this relationship dynamic is interesting to me because often there is no mention of how one becomes an energy vampire. Although the intention of such language is meant to focus on educating vulnerable individuals and keep them safe from such people, there's a sense of othering associated with categorizing energy vampires as if they are pre-existing entities without a point of origin. Or [if sources do discuss origins](#), such individuals are quickly summed up as those who drain others because they're dealing with their past trauma in an unhealthy manner, have pre-existing mental health issues or certain attachment types.

Similar to those with highly stigmatized disorders such as narcissism, schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder, energy vampires' pop psychology descriptions exclude or understate a vital part of their narrative. When we know how energy vampires are made, we are made aware of how perpetual cycles of abuse and stigma can be halted. And I'm by no means blaming the victims of energy vampires here (I've definitely been one of them over the years). I'm merely interested in avoiding reductive descriptions of people that can incidentally do more harm than good. Not to mention the fact that such reductive descriptions can obscure the fact that while some people epitomize the energy vampire archetype, the existence of such an individual is fairly common.

Raziel, the tragic wraith protagonist of the *Soul Reaver* series, contains within his arc a nuanced portrayal of how an energy vampire is made and unmade. He is also recognizable on sight as an energy vampire, a walking bundle of raw sinew and nerves. His trauma is etched into his body and as the Elder God of Nosgoth's Underworld puts it, he has a "deeper need" than other vampires. It's no wonder that he does either, his betrayal by his King/Father figure Kain, was so complete and so visceral. For the trespass of evolving a set of wings which symbolized his daedalic ascendance in power above Kain, Raziel is cast into the Abyss and consigned to the Underworld after having said



wings brutally ripped off by his liege. This traumatic experience twisted Raziel into a creature that, while first despondent of his fate, quickly learned to survive at all costs, even if it was solely for revenge.

Throughout his journey, Raziel must suck up the souls of those he fights to sustain himself, including those of his brothers and even himself in another timeline. Before he was turned into a vampire general by Kain, he lived the antithesis of this existence as a vainglorious Sarafan Priest. He was a self-righteous crusader who endlessly blathered about his divine quest to rid the world of vampires. In addition to the delicious poetic justice of Kain turning such an individual into the monster he hates, Raziel's human side illustrates the more common sort of energy vampire – the sort of person, like Colin Robinson, who can suck the air out of the room with their tedious and arrogant presence. Though to be fair, Raziel as the Elder God's Angel of Death was equally prone to naive monologues and soliloquies. The difference being that in addition to morality, Raziel was understandably fixated on fate and causality.

Wraith Raziel was, for many players who were angsty teens like me when they played Soul Reaver for the first time, strangely compelling however. His tragic introduction inspired an initial wave of pathos that, for those empathetic to his suffering because of

a tyrant's rule, made them more than willing to follow and help Raziel along his voracious path towards avenging himself. Raziel fans, especially those who were new to the Legacy of Kain series, were sometimes deeply obsessive about the character. One internet shrine I came across back in the day professed love for the character and admitted that they knew others wouldn't understand such an affection for a fictional person.

Today such an attachment is much more recognized as related to phenomena like [fictosexuality](#), [fictoromance](#) or [fictophilia](#), in which a person truly loves, desires or is infatuated with a character. The most common instance people know of is [Akihiko Kondo](#), who married a hologram of Hatsune Miku and identifies as a fictosexual. I won't say that the internet shrine's maker was any of those terms, it's unfair of me to assume and I'm in no position to pathologize anyone (nor would I even if I was). But suffice to say, Raziel's reaving reached beyond even the confines of the game, drawing from the player's emotional or psychic energy.

[As Strictly Fantasy](#) has noted in one of his series of video essays on the Legacy of Kain series, Amy Hennig smartly wrote Raziel as a protagonist that would appeal to a new generation of players. But he was also conceived as a character that would act as a foil to Kain and his cruel (yet earnest) schemes to free Nosgoth of a notion of fate that




forces individuals to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the many. Raziel often does the right thing for the wrong reason and he is preyed upon by cosmic agents like the Elder God and the Time Streamer Moebius, who offer him false binaries such as to redeem or avenge himself.

Raziel eventually has another major revelation about his existence – that Kain threw Raziel into the Abyss as a desperate yet calculated gambit to thwart those who rule over the spiritual and corporeal realms of Nosgoth. To prevent history from being dictated by those who believe fate is more important than free will. By destroying a sanguine vampire as powerful as Raziel, he was able to be remade into a being that was unfettered by fate. Let me be clear that I don't mean that Kain's actions are morally right; that would be akin to saying that abusers with good intentions are morally right. But what this revelation does highlight is that Raziel's existence as an energy vampire is not something that you can easily pin down. He is both victim and victimizer, a redeemer and a destroyer.

In *Legacy of Kain: Defiance*, the final entry before the series went into its current seemingly endless hiatus, Raziel meets his end by his own hand. He realized that the only way for him to reveal Kain's true enemy is by purifying the physical Soul Reaver blade with his wraith's soul, uniting the spirit world with the corporeal world once more (that's

the short and simple version, believe it or not). He is able to forgive Kain for his transgressions, but not because of a sudden pang of sympathy for his abuser. For perhaps what is the first time in his arc, Raziel makes a decision based on reason instead of emotionally acting out of his history of violence and trauma. By choosing outside of the endless binary choices presented to him by others, Raziel sets himself free and by extension gives Kain a chance to also free the rest of Nosgoth from its dictators.

I cannot say forgiveness is the sole thing that could unmake an energy vampire. I do think, however, that being able to reconcile oneself with what made them one could ameliorate one's circumstances considerably. Kain and Raziel taught me about boundaries and respecting one's right to free will, while recognizing that championing free will alone does not make someone morally right in every instance it's invoked. We all live in a world of energy vampires these days and every one of us has the potential to become one. 



## THE BURNT OFFERING | **STU HORVATH**

# RAVENLOFT (1983)

*The following is an excerpt from Monsters, Aliens, and Holes in the Ground: A Guide to Tabletop Roleplaying Games from Dungeons & Dragons to Mothership, [in stores now](#).*

\* \* \*

From the moment he crept out of his crypt, Count Strahd von Zarovich proved to be one of the most enduring characters to spring from *Dungeons & Dragons*. He was born in 1978, created by Tracy and Laura Hickman, to serve as the villain of their homebrew adventure. They playtested the scenario every Halloween for five years before pitching it to TSR, who published it as an official module, *16: Ravenloft*. It's a groundbreaking module, with an emphasis on story that would lay the groundwork for the *Dragonlance* saga and narrative-focused scenarios for the next decade.

*Ravenloft* embraced the aesthetics of gothic horror stories, which immediately made it stand out among the Frazetta-influenced visuals of most *D&D* modules—Strahd is depicted in a tuxedo while the generic

adventurers in Clyde Caldwell's illustrations look like, well, generic adventurers clad in armor; it's an unusual juxtaposition. The mix of eras somehow works, though, telegraphing that despite the gothic setting, the adventure is still fantasy at its core (much the same way *The Isle of Dread* is still a very standard *D&D* experience despite the trappings of *King Kong*).

*Ravenloft* also used a gothic framing for its narrative. Long ago, in the realm of Barovia, Strahd loved a woman named Tatyana, who, in turn, loved his younger brother, Sergei. Blaming her rejection on his age, Strahd resorted to necromancy to restore his youth, and, on the day of the wedding between his brother and Tatyana, he murdered Sergei. Tatyana, horrified, took her own life, and Strahd, now a vampire, retreated to his castle to brood after killing the traitorous guards who attempted to assassinate their corrupt lord by riddling him with arrows. It doesn't get more gothic than that.

While that history remains true, the staging of the module changes with each play. Sev-

eral key factors are determined by the draw of tarot cards during a fortune-telling session before reaching the castle. Four cards determine locations—of Strahd himself, of his diary (which details the love triangle), and of two powerful magic items that can result in his undoing. The fifth card determines one of the Count's four potential motivations, the most interesting of which is his desire to use the presence of the players as a way to seduce the burgomaster's adopted daughter, Ireena, who bears more than a passing resemblance to Tatyana.

Aesthetics and narrative tricks aside, *Ravenloft's* reputation as a classic sits squarely on the shoulders of Strahd himself. In many ways, he's the first genuine *Dungeons & Dragons* villain. The lich at the heart of *Tomb of Horrors* is really more of a trap than a character, while the trio of chieftains from the *Giants-series* of modules are merely big piles of hit points with names. These, and others, have grown in stature and detail over time and with the release of new products, but Strahd is different. He is a fully fleshed out character from the start: He has an agenda and an inner life. And, perhaps most importantly, he is present throughout the module, taunting the players, and testing their mettle in skirmishes and feints, rather than waiting for them in the final room of a dungeon.

Part of Strahd's character is conveyed in an unlikely way: Mechanically. Player characters and monsters were built out of similar but distinct systems. Strahd marks the first time in *Dungeons & Dragons* when the two systems merge. He is a monster, with the vampire's full suite of powers, but he is also a tenth-level Magic-User with the accompanying selection of spells. The combination makes him a formidable opponent, but it also imbues him with a sense of history and personality.

\* \* \*

*Ravenloft* proved so popular that TSR commissioned a sequel, module *110: Ravenloft II: The House on Gryphon Hill*



(1986). Though attributed to Tracy and Laura Hickman, it was completed after Tracy left TSR, with the writing done in sections by David "Zeb" Cook, Jeff Grubb, Harold Johnson, and Douglas Niles. Unlike the elegant *Ravenloft*, *Gryphon Hill* is a confusing mess, with parallel realities, a machine that swaps personalities, and two Strahds (one being a sort of heroic, Frankenstein alchemist who is not a vampire at all, maybe). I've never quite grasped the module on its own terms, let alone the option to muddy the waters further by running it in conjunction with the original (three Strahds?).

Despite its failings, *Gryphon Hill* expands the gothic world surrounding Strahd and provides the rough outline of what would eventually become the campaign setting *Ravenloft: Realm of Terror* (1990), even introducing the lich, Azalin, who is arguably the setting's main character. The box set reveals the Dark Powers who, using magical mists, spirit away especially evil people and their lands in order to add them to a cursed collection of interconnected domains of dread. These evil souls become Darklords, and, though powerful, they suffer curses that reflect their evil deeds back at them forever.



The campaign setting is a mixed bag. On the one hand, it is a wonderful exploration of gothic horror. *Dark Sun*, with its striking artwork by Gerald Brom and Tom Baxa, is often credited as the first aesthetically-driven campaign setting, but this unfairly overlooks how the massive body of gloomy artwork by pulp artist Stephen Fabian defines *Ravenloft*, with its foggy streets, cluttered studies, and haunted visages.

On the other hand, the power-accumulating mechanics of *D&D* make a poor machine for horror, even with the box set's fear and horror. Both are based on saving throws versus paralysis, and, while less clunky than the fear mechanic in *CB1: Conan Unchained*, they still don't function as elegantly as *Call of Cthulhu*'s sanity system. There is a vexing lack of clarity in the core theme of the setting, as well—why have the Dark Powers assembled this zoo of evil? Is it to punish the Darklords? That would seem to be the case, with their various curses. But then why bring innocents, like the player characters, into the mists, as well? Conceivably, the domains of dread could function as a massive battery for existential suffering, but if this is the case, the box set never explores it.

Nevertheless, Strahd is the first Darklord, with the mists claiming him and Barovia shortly after Tatyana's suicide. The Dark

Powers gifted him with complete dominion over Barovia, but once a generation, Strahd meets a woman who appears to be the reincarnation of Tatyana, and history repeats. He languishes there still. In practical terms, Strahd is both central to the *Ravenloft* campaign setting, but also removed from it. He is the subject of several *Ravenloft* novels, and his presence is felt all over the support materials; but, he is far too powerful and too important to the setting to be challenged by a party of adventurers like those who might have once bested him in the original module.

Strahd's new position as a cosmic lynch pin didn't stop TSR from reprinting the original module as *House of Strahd* (1993), updating the source material to take into account *Ravenloft*'s unique rules while aligning it with Strahd's new power level as a Darklord. The result is strange. The once cutting-edge module now feels strangely old fashioned among the more narrative- and exploration-focused *Ravenloft* campaign material. Strahd had grown too large for his once mesmerizing and mysterious castle.

In 1999, TSR issued a Silver Anniversary version of *I6*, which was a direct update of the original module to *AD&D* Second Edition rules without including the additions from the *Ravenloft* campaign setting. In 2006, Wizards of the Coast updated the original module again, this time to the 3.5E rules, as *Expedition to Castle Ravenloft*, by Bruce Cordell and James Wyatt. This version distinguishes itself by expanding the source material, fleshing out Barovia, and providing additional adventure material outside of the castle. For these books, Strahd remains largely the same.

A decade later, Wizards once again returned to Castle Ravenloft with *Curse of Strahd* (2016), updating the module for *D&D* 5E. This version maintains the basic approach, expanding the Barovia that Cordell and Wyatt introduced, but jettisons their details. Instead, the Hickmans returned to brainstorm new ideas, though. This Strahd feels different somehow—colder. His dark romanticism has been drained out, and his ambi-



tion is largely replaced by boredom. He kills, and terrorizes, and corrupts because it is the only way he can divert his attention from an unending existence.

\* \* \*

In many ways, Strahd is a vessel for the audience's relationship with an ever-changing and evolving vampire legend. While a character in his own right, he is broadly drawn, so every group of players can make him their own. There are many Strahds, each defined by the tastes of the people at the table.

Strahd has surprisingly little in common with the Dracula of Bram Stoker's novel—most obviously, he lacks the mustache, but also the feral impulsiveness and much of the psychosexual subtext. Stoker's biggest influence on Strahd is actually found in the one facet of his character that popular culture has most often ignored: The implication that Dracula was a practitioner of the black arts and an enthusiastic devil worshipper. From this comes Strahd's status in *D&D* as a Magic-User, his obscene necromantic experiments and his compact with the Dark Powers. The two original modules, when combined, also mirror the settings of the novel, with *16: Ravenloft* depicting a version of Castle Dracula in Transylvania and *110: Gryphon Hill* standing in for the English countryside.

In terms of fashion sense and temperament, Strahd has more in common with Lugosi's debonair, calculating Dracula, as well as the refractions of that interpretation of the character that have bounced through popular culture since 1931 (so much so that the box art for the original NES *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*, 1987, itself a conglomeration of Dracula tropes, lifts Clyde Caldwell's iconic cover painting for *16: Ravenloft* and it doesn't look at all out of place). Curse of Strahd, meanwhile, gives a nod to Anne Rice's vampire novels. Here, Strahd's previous consorts are women, and he has a new obsession with a possibly reincarnated Tatyana, but the most recent object of his affections, Escher, is a man—a gesture to the bisexuality of Rice's Lestat.




The clearest antecedent of Strahd, though, is Barnabas Collins, the vampire that dominated ABC's soap opera *Dark Shadows* from 1966 to 1971. Like Strahd, Collins is cut from the same cloth as popular conceptions of Dracula, but it is in Collins audiences first see the synthesis of the vampire legend and the reincarnation romance of Boris Karloff's *The Mummy* (1932). Like Tatyana, the object of Collins's affection leaps off a cliff to her death rather than become his lover and, a century later, the vampire is obsessed with a woman who resembles her. This idea captured the popular imagination so thoroughly that it has been included in many subsequent adaptations of Dracula (beginning in 1972 with *Blacula* and, in my view, forever cemented in 1992's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*), to the point that most people assume it was part of the original novel.

More than anything, it is the Collins-esque cycle of reincarnation that defines Strahd, beyond the confines of any one adventure module and into the realms of the meta. In the *Ravenloft* campaign setting, the Dark Powers force Strahd to relive his lowest moment, reintroducing him to the woman who he can't help but drive to her death, again and again. Even if a group of adven-

turers should triumph in *House of Strahd*, those Dark Powers will bring him back to unlife and start the cycle again.

Thanks to *Ravenloft*'s status as a classic, and its numerous reprints, this cycle holds true in real-world play, as well. I have killed Strahd three times, and even though the most recent time was the likely the last for me, he will live again, and be killed again, for other groups around other tables, for as long as people gather together to play *Dungeons & Dragons*. Fun for the players, but for Strahd, it is an endless torment.

The Dark Powers are truly cruel. 

### ***I6: Ravenloft***

Tracy and Laura Hickman  
Cover by Clyde Caldwell  
TSR, 1983

### ***I10: Ravenloft II: The House on Gryphon Hill***

Tracy and Laura Hickman  
Cover by Clyde Caldwell  
TSR, 1986

### ***Ravenloft: Realm of Terror***

Bruce Nesmith and Andria Hayday  
Cover by Clyde Caldwell  
Box set  
TSR, 1990

### ***House of Strahd***

Tracy and Laura Hickman  
Cover by Dana Knutson  
TSR, 1993

### ***Castlevania II: Simon's Quest***

Konami, 1987



AREA OF EFFECT | JAY CASTELLO

## OPEN WORLD VAMPIRES

“Places are increasingly being restructured as centres for consumption,” and “places themselves are in a sense consumed,” and “places can be literally consumed ... depleted, devoured, and exhausted by use,” and “it is possible for localities to consume one’s identity so that such places become almost literally *all-consuming places*.” So writes sociologist John Urry in one paragraph of his aptly titled book *Consuming Places*.

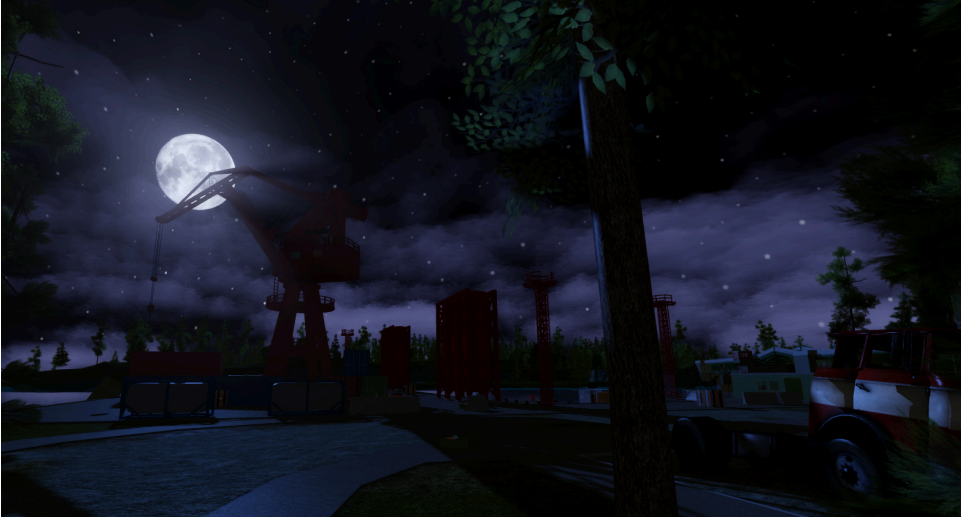
So, it is for places and so it is for art. Stories, media, “content,” – these are increasingly things we talk about in terms of consumption. And perhaps none more than open world games, where Urry’s theories of place collide with the desperation of corporations to keep our attention as it’s increasingly fragmented among new shows, new games, new short video on every scroll.

The open world map is almost nothing but a center for consumption. Let loose in a space that has probably been boasted in marketing for its size, players are free to Hoover up a thousand side quests and twice as many collectables. These maps are there for con-

sumption and little else; they may be visually stunning but this too is a kind of consumption, ornamented with day-night cycles that capture every moment at its most beautiful. Pink sunrises, blue sky noon’s, golden hour, stary nights that are somehow just as bright as the daytime, because God forbid you be restricted by anything as meagre as the rotation of the earth.

These vast games with hundreds of hours of “content” are good, we’re told, for the gamer who can only afford one or two purchases per year. We’re led to imagine this theoretical consumer wringing every last drop, until the game is barren. Exhausted by use, as Urry would say. On the other hand, we have the gamer with slightly more cash in their pocket, happy to shell out extra to let the game consume them in turn. Play early; wear the game’s logo while you do it.

Corporations want media to be vampiric. Like the starving blood drinker, we have to crave the next fix from when it’s shown to us on a shiny stage by an overly enthusiastic hype man. We have to give ourselves to it



mindlessly, all our attention focused on drinking it in. There's so much of it that we ignore when we're full and keep going, maybe until the thing is entirely drained. And if the hype cycle is good enough, the change goes both ways. We wear our merchandise. We brag that this thing has consumed us.

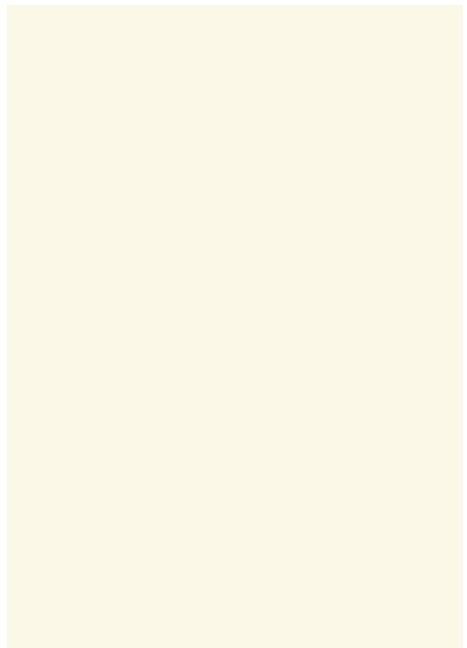
None of this is new to say, and to put it this way is somehow more depressing than I actually see the situation. This is, after all, a negative view of vampires. Once, they might only have been a metaphor for the rich living parasitically, but aren't they more, now? Aren't vampires hot these days?

Maybe they already got us. Maybe capitalism has turned us all into vampires already and it's too late. But in the modern canon, struggling with how to survive as a vampire is in. Edward Cullen's vegetarianism didn't capture the hearts of millions of teenagers for no reason.

Sometimes you sink your teeth into a piece of media as an act of love, and it changes you. There's something of the vampire to that, too. And it's easy to say that the difference is bespoke, personal experiences from small groups of artists versus the tangle of compromise that is every AAA game. But I know people who have gone into the open world and pored carefully, deliberately, over every nook and cranny, and come back dif-

ferent. I wouldn't be writing this if *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* didn't have a [weirdly beautiful version](#) of a stone circle that I'm deeply in love with that got me thinking about spaces in games in the first place.

Maybe we've all been bitten by the content grind and our hunger is insatiable. And maybe games, media, places themselves are set up to encourage us to lean into that instinct, unthinking and bacchanalian. But it's the last two of Urry's thoughts that might help us restructure. What do we exhaust, and what exhausts us? 🍷





CASTING DEEP METER | **LEVI RUBECK**

## ONE THOUSAND YEAR OLD VAMPIRE HUNTER D

It's been a lifetime since I last watched *Vampire Hunter D*. Empires have risen and fallen since then, notably Blockbuster video, the doggy-door sized gateway to anime for me and thousands of others. You know the titles, either because you were browsing the spines as well or older siblings and sketchy friends were always talking about the pre-Toonami days with the likes of *Bubblegum Crisis*, *Project A-Ko*, *Ninja Scroll*, and of course heavy hitters like *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell*. This was the monoculture, and we were all locked in, unless you traded tapes with strangers on AOL or went to other extremes.

Among these obelisks of cartoons from overseas stood *Vampire Hunter D*, an anime based off a series of novels with cover paintings by problematic fave Yoshitaka Amano that synced up seamlessly with the videogames that he also happened to illustrate for. So far in the future it's back in the past again, we have a standard mysterious hero, monsters classic and mutated, pauses

so pregnant they've got to be having quadruplets at the very least, egregious nip-slips, a full suite of dripping synths, and wild deviations from established vampire lore. Back in the early 90's this movie was absolutely captivating because little could even come close to the unhinged weirdness and vibes for vibes' sake without going completely overboard. *Vampire Hunter D* feels quaint now, but only because it was just tame enough to remain a relatively safe and repeatable pick for pre-teens and up.

At the start, we are told that this story takes place ten thousand years in the future, and things are bleak. But it's not a total reinvention like other vampire mythologies, as it's revealed that Count Dracula is a revered vampire ancestor, and later, likely the father to the titular human-vampire "dhampir" D. But the noble vampires in this movie antagonizing D and the humans seem to only know about Dracula by name, appearing as pale sociopathic shades of his image, existing only to chase



whatever whim abates the boredom that consumes them from day to day.

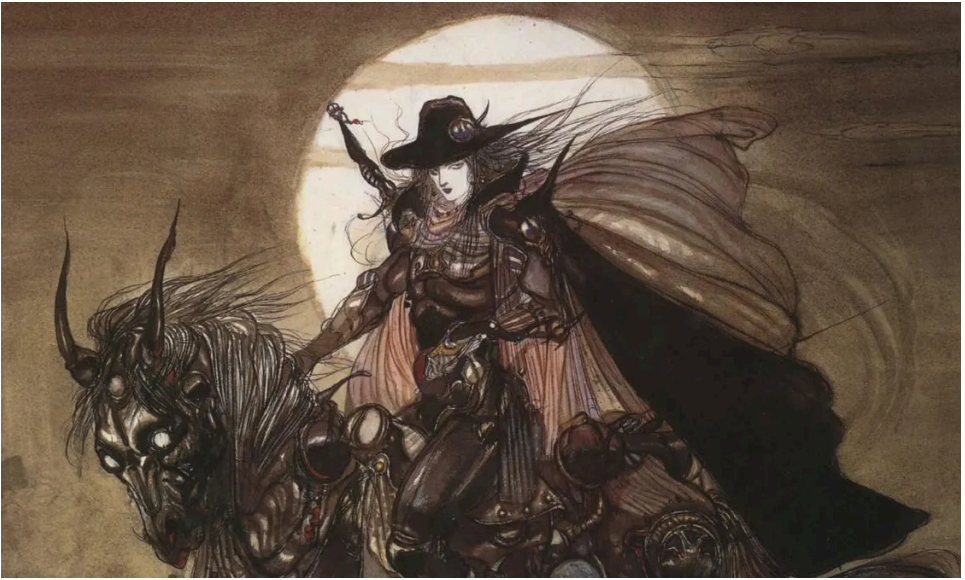
At the root of Count Magnus Lee's boredom is the fact that he's un-lived for more than those ten thousand years. He's wandered for a hundred lifetimes and is currently the head of a family that appears to be mostly skin-peeled lackeys, cancerous monsters, a space-bending mutant, and vampire daughter Countess L'armica Lee, who believes backwards notions such as "pure noble blood" and an unbreakable social order. But she praises her vampire ancestor, whose portrait hangs in their industrial-chic castle, begging him for some insight into her father's willingness to tempt the destruction their family for this human woman, only to learn that she herself is born of a human woman. The vampire hunter shares this lineage, and even proclaims that her vampire ancestor had a much more well-rounded understanding of love and human relations than she realizes, with a little glimmer in his eye.

Which is to say that despite millennia of experience, Count Magnus Lee appears to have shared very little with his daughter, and in fact seems to have simply withered down to base desires wrapped in incredible power. A nice way of saying that he's a wafer-thin

character, truly just a big creep who treats his crew like shit. It's a wonder he lived as long as he did.


But while watching *Vampire Hunter D* again, I can't help but connect it to the relatively recent solo role-playing game *Thousand Year Old Vampire* by Tim Hutchings. Like most games in my collection, I haven't actually worked through this one on my own yet, but I've read a few synopses and comics of other people's playthroughs, and the premise is essentially "difficult choices." You create your character, give them a life, and then outline how that life is stolen by a vampire, and they rise again. They have some family and friends, possessions that bring to mind these people, and they struggle through non-death, killing and feeding, existing and fighting, living so long that these precious people are eventually forgotten, and once beloved treasures are lost. After the length of several lifetimes, you slip up or fate simply has other plans, and you are destroyed.

*Thousand Year Old Vampire* is a powerful rumination on memory, death, and the choices we make to hold on to what's important to us, even knowing that eventually we must return to dust, our names carried only on the wind. Vampires themselves make the



perfect vessel for this, tempted and intrigued by their immortality, power, and lust for life in a way that only one removed from the true joys of it can be. To live a thousand lives defeats the purpose of living altogether, of making the most of what little we are given.

Count Magnus Lee has “lived” so long that existence barely carries any thrill or nuance for him anymore, he has succumbed to his own flesh. The movie hardly touches on his actual life, but I can’t help but wonder where he started, what he can no longer recall from his interminable journey. To live longer than all recorded civilizations and decide that horniness is really all you’re into, well, it makes for an easy villain for a quick little vampire flick.

Lee has almost seen it all. He’s lived long enough to leave only boredom, to forget everything he’s forgotten and live like an animal that can never be satiated. He laughs and boasts and torments, but if life is pain, he is the end stage of an infinite life of infinite pain. The vampires can keep it. 



NOAH'S BEAT BOX | **NOAH SPRINGER**

## **VAMPS - OTHERWISE**

Vamp: before, during, or after a solo, you can use a vamp when you repeat the same chord or chord progression with progressive aspects

Vamp: before, during or after a solo, you can use a vamp when you repeat the same chord or chord progression with persons asleep

Vamp: before, during or after a solo, you can use a vamp when you repeat the same grave or chord progression with persons asleep

Vamp: before, during or after a body, you can use a vamp when you repeat the same grave or chord progression with persons asleep

Vamp: before, during or after a body, you can use a vamp when you believed the same grave or chord progression with persons asleep

Vamp: before, during or after a body, you can use a dead person when you believed the same grave or chord progression with persons asleep

Vamp: before the reanimated body, you can use a dead person when you believed the same grave or chord progression with persons asleep

Vamp: before the reanimated body, you can use a dead person when you believed to have come from the grave or chord progression with persons asleep

Vamp: before the reanimated body of a dead person when you believed to have come from the grave or chord progression with persons asleep

Vamp: before the reanimated body of a dead person believed to have come from the grave or chord progression with persons asleep





Vamp: before the reanimated body of a dead person believed to have come from the grave at night progression with persons asleep

Vamp: before the reanimated body of a dead person believed to have come from the grave at night and suck the blood of persons asleep

Vampire: the reanimated body of a dead person believed to come from the grave at night and suck the blood of persons asleep.





FORMS IN LIGHT | **JUSTIN REEVE**

## PARASITES AND PREDATION

The intersection of architecture and videogames represents a realm where storytelling, aesthetics and player interaction coalesce to form a truly immersive world. In the roleplaying game *Vampyr*, you're transported to the gritty, grime-filled streets of postwar London. While the game has been critically acclaimed for its narrative depth and gameplay mechanics, the architectural design is definitely worth a mention, being at once a thematic and functional cornerstone of the game. Let's dive into the details of the architecture in *Vampyr*, drawing some connections to the fundamentally parasitic nature of vampires and the questionable mechanics of preying on people for survival. Trust me. There's more to the level design than you might think.

The architecture in *Vampyr* is the spitting image of the setting, by which I mean a series of streetscapes marred by war, crippled by a pandemic and plagued by supernatural malevolence. This depiction of London goes beyond mere set dressing or decoration, standing as a testament to the artistry and narrative prowess of the devel-

oper, Don't Nod. Players are thrust into a meticulously reconstructed early twentieth century London adorned with Gothic and Victorian apartment buildings, cobblestone streets and of course eerie, gas-lit alleyways. This dedication to authenticity is a portal for players, dropping them into a time and place teetering on the brink of social collapse.

With all of their soaring spires, intricate embellishments and inherent sense of foreboding, Gothic and Victorian architecture emerge as a dominant visual motif in *Vampyr*. These elements, combined with nuanced lighting and shadow, saturate the game with an incredibly unnerving and unsettling ambiance which is entirely integral to building an atmosphere of dread and foreboding. The architectural design in *Vampyr* also transcends the superficial side of level design by actively participating in the narrative. The protagonist and recently reborn vampire Jonathan Reid relies on this architectural layout to unveil secrets, interact with characters and unearth the enigmas underlying the ongoing pandemic. Buildings, winding alleys and concealed passageways



become vehicles for storytelling, encouraging you to explore, interact, engage and immerse yourself in the game world.

The theme of parasitism is at the core of the narrative and gameplay experience in *Vampyr*, plunging players into the moral quagmire of simply existing as a vampire. The symbiotic relationship between architectural design and parasitism offers insight into the nature of predation. Vampires have long been depicted as parasitic beings, draining the lifeblood of the living. The concept is on the other hand elevated in *Vampyr*, as the very survival of the player hinges on the consumption of human blood. The architectural design seamlessly accommodates this parasitic motif, with an array of shadowy corners, concealed passages and shady corridors that provide players with plenty of opportunities to stealthily hunt and prey upon potentially unwitting passersby.

The architectural elements in the game are ingeniously integrated to heighten the questionable thrill of preying on people. Players can exploit the environment by making use of vantage points, hiding spots and shortcuts to stalk and ambush their next meal. Such a seamless fusion of architecture and gameplay mechanics enhances the overall experience, allowing players to fully adopt their new role as a vampire, along with all of the ethical concerns that accompany the posi-

tion. *Vampyr* weaves a tapestry of moral dilemmas, forcing players to grapple with the choice of succumbing to their base instincts or attempting to resist the urge to consume. The consequences of these choices extend beyond the narrative, profoundly impacting the social stability of the city itself, architectural design playing a pivotal role in these decisions. The urban layout and the positions of its people exert considerable influence over the choices made, compelling players to weigh the benefits of predation against the potentially catastrophic destabilization of the community in general.


These mechanics of predation find themselves inexorably linked to the architectural design of the game world. Proficiency in navigating the environment, understanding the routines of the inhabitants and estimating the repercussions of your actions are fundamental to the game. The layout of London is truly labyrinthine, intricately interconnected and replete with diverse districts and buildings. Players have to leverage their knowledge of the environment in *Vampyr* to hunt potential prey and of course evade pursuers. The architectural design presents not only challenges but also opportunities, encouraging players to strategize and adapt their tactics to the diverse encounters presented throughout the main storyline.



The characters in *Vampyr* each have a profile complete with personal contacts and connections. Architecture plays a part in this prosopography as their behavior and routine is profoundly influenced by their surroundings. Players must immerse themselves into the lives of their potential victims, gathering insight into their problems and concerns through conversation, investigation and exploratory forays into their living spaces. The action of preying on people in *Vampyr* is in this way fraught with consequences, not only on a personal level but for the city as a whole. The demise of a specific character can produce a shift in the social structure of the community, changing the behavior of the remaining inhabitants. In other words, the architectural design metamorphoses into a dynamic, responsive entity which reacts to player choice, contributing to the creation of a game world where your actions can have sweeping and sometimes unpredictable consequences.

*Vampyr* makes use of architecture to shape your experience as a player. The game is built on the assumption that architecture is more than just a background, putting urban planning forward as a means through which narratives are woven, atmospheres are enriched and gameplay mechanics are imbued with meaning. The relationship between architecture, parasitism and the mechanics of survival in *Vampyr* make the

game both intellectually and emotionally resonant. The faithful representation of early twentieth century London, adorned with Gothic and Victorian elements, puts players in a world on the brink of collapse. This architectural authenticity fosters a potent sense of time and place, enriched by the backdrop of social turmoil and ethical ambiguity. The exploration of parasitism, coupled with the mechanics of preying on people, emerges as a profoundly interconnected and functional aspect of the architectural design, as the city itself becomes not just a playground for predation but an instrument of choice, consequence and agency.

*Vampyr* is a testament to the various ways in which architecture can be used in level design to shape experiences. The game reveals the true potential of architecture to become a tool for the manipulation of mechanics, aesthetics and story in videogames. Tightening the bonds between architecture, parasitism and the mechanics of predation, *Vampyr* transforms the gameplay experience into an artful exploration of darkness and morality, leaving an indelible imprint on the memory of its players, a black spot which remains marked on your mind long after you put down the controller. 



HERE'S THE THING | **ROB RICH**

## VAMPIRE, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD STORYTELLER

*Here's the Thing is where Rob dumps his random thoughts and strong opinions on all manner of nerdy subjects - from videogames and movies to board games and toys.*

*Rob reminisces about his early days of tabletop RPGs, and how much a bad Storyteller in Vampire almost torpedoed his interest entirely.*

Like most high school dorks with a limited pool of friends (but friends that really counted, you know?), I spent a somewhat decent amount of time experimenting with tabletop roleplaying games. Of course, *Dungeons & Dragons* was one that I played fairly often, and I had way more fun once I stepped away from my Cleric comfort zone and tried out the Sorcerer class, but from what I can remember these 25 or so years on it was actually White Wolf Publishing's *Vampire: The Masquerade* that was my first. And my favorite. But here's the thing: It was also how I learned the hard way just

how much of a difference a good Storyteller (*Vampire's* version of a GM) can make.

My closest friend in high school was very big into fantasy, roleplaying games and the like. He owned (or at least someone in his family did) more than one sword. He once got yelled at in study hall for belting out lyrics from "Man of La Mancha" at the top of his lungs. He also introduced me to TTRPGs and we started with *Vampire*, of course.


It was a quick and spontaneous game, with basically zero prep. A few of us were all hanging out and we decided to give it a try, both for fun and so I could get a feel for it. I made my character in like a half hour or so (I kept it relatively simple with a Nosferatu) and we were off. And it was a lot of fun! Even without any planning or prior story setup we were all able to enjoy a basic but still engaging vampiric adventure, complete with fighting and intrigue, before it was time for everyone to say goodnight.



And then sometime later we took part in a game run by his older brother.

My friend's older brother is someone I would describe as exactly that: An Older Brother. He was a bit of a dick, kind of a bully, but not really hateful or anything that extreme. The kind of person I wouldn't go out of my way to hang out with or talk to, you know? And playing a game run by him was – to put it mildly – not fun. I don't remember anything about the plot or any of the other player characters. But I do remember the point at which I mentally clocked-out of the whole thing.

I was playing ... I think a Gangrel ... and we had to climb a large cliff. It's the kind of obstacle an actually good Storyteller would resolve with one, maybe two dice rolls per character. This motherfucker had us roll ten times. Each. And unfortunately for me I botched my eighth or ninth roll so I fell from almost the top of this stupid cliff and landed directly in torpor (basically like a vampire healing sleep). Meaning I was AWOL for a good chunk of the rest of the session, all because an asshole thought it would be funny to make everyone make ten skill check rolls in a row.

That didn't mark the end of my tabletop adventures, thankfully, but it left me sour on *Vampire* ever since. Which is a real shame because I vastly preferred its simpler game-play systems and approachable use of ten-sided dice for everything. Not that I hated *D&D* but trying to remember which dice to use for what and how many always kinda bugged me. Anyway, I haven't played *Vampire* in over two decades because of a bad Storyteller. And that's a real shame. 



NONHUMAN MEDITATIONS | **ALYSSA WEJEBE**

## WHERE ARE THE GIANT BATS?

*Thou shalt be ravishing to the human eye. Thou shalt not be too inhuman. Thou shalt not be a beast like some mangy mongrels baying at the moon.*

Feel free to throw out corrections and provide directions to media that features this – but so far, it certainly looks like vampires just don't get as much shapeshifting action as werewolves, and that's why they always tend to lose that competition in my mind. Who can compete with Bigby just transforming into a [giant wolf](#) to break Bloody Mary to pieces? Reverse of a werewolf he may be, having always been a giant wolf first that later takes on a human shape – but that's an inverse that still leaves him in the werewolf circle as a very close relative or honorary member, and already more interesting than many vampires.

Not that vampires don't have their own appeal. Some are neat. But generally, they could be more. Vampires could be a real contender with their obvious bat connection. But they haven't seized their potential as much. To the point, why not more giant bat

transformations to really counter werewolves? They do shift into their little bat forms for travel or a quick getaway, and that's fun – but more could be done with it, there could be more variety.

And yet...perhaps that's part of this vampiric reluctance?

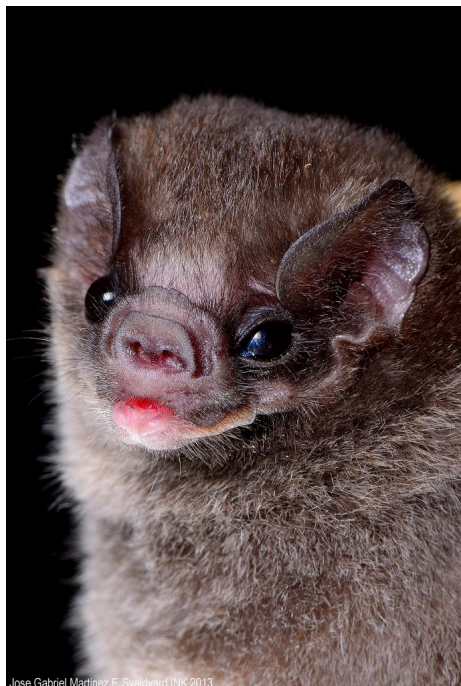


Excerpt from [Science Comics: Bats](#) by [Falynn Koch](#).

i. *Bats are adorable.*

When thinking about real wolves and real bats...well, wolves also appear more threatening. Both animals can still get a bad reputation, and each has had their turn at being turned into fictional monsters for human purposes of horror. But that ghastly reputation seems particularly outsized for real-life bats. Like...for the most part, they're just

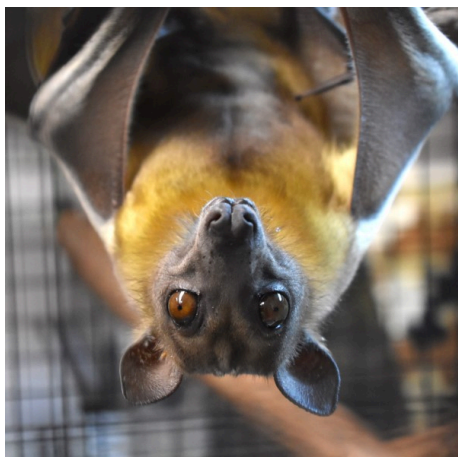
little guys. They really do kinda look like itty bitty flying mice, but even more appealing. With their compact bodies, they're like chibi critters, but real.



Jose Gabriel Martinez F. Svalbard/INK 2013

*Photo of a hairy-legged vampire bat by Jose G. Martinez-Fonseca.*

Even the bigger ones are cute as heck. Check out the fruit bat or flying fox—almost alarmingly big, but their faces really do bear a similarity to particularly adorable foxes. They were perfect for starring in Janell Cannon's picture book *Stellaluna*. And Falynn Koch's educational *Science Comics: Bats* is a charmingly drawn piece of sequential art focused on the natural history of these animals, from the spectacled flying fox to the little brown bat. (Even their names can sound adorable.)



*Straw-Colored Fruit Bat from Akron Zoo.*

Now, wolves can be cute. They're also bigger and can pose more of an immediate threat, or definitely look the part. (See 0:46 on this Nat Geo WILD video.) Bats, not so much. If their real animal link mostly leans toward wide-eyed and adorable, it's kind of more reasonable that vampires tend to shy away from seriously transforming into them. Good for a swift escape, not so great for intimidation. Vampires apparently have a reputation to maintain.

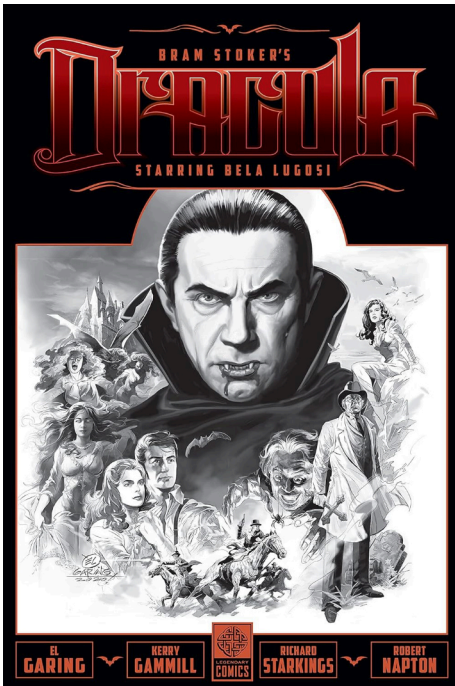
ii. *Bats can fly.*

More on actual bats – they can fly. Actually fly. Not glide, but truly fly. Only mammal that can. Very cool.

But that must've been tough for live-action horror movies from the start, which have had an impact on vampires in general. Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* may just well be what people think when they hear the word "vampire," or they think of something that's at least drawn some inspiration from Lugosi's aesthetic and vibe. But Lugosi's *Dracula* certainly didn't pull off some insane shapeshifting illusion with special effects in 1931.

So perhaps early limitations of special effects and creatively thinking outside of the box played a role in keeping vampires generally more down-to-earth while stalking their prey.





Graphic novel that followed Bram Stoker's original book more closely while artist El Garing drew the titular vampire in the likeness of Bela Lugosi.

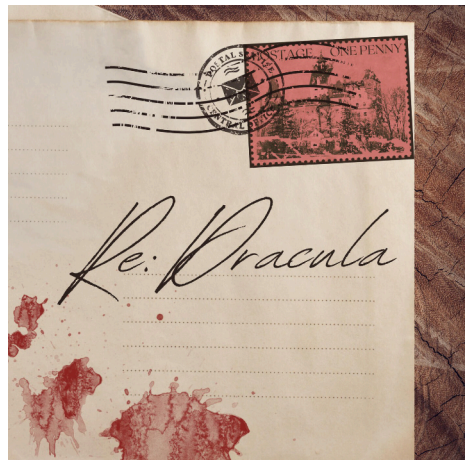
iii. That human metaphor has its own draw.

Still, I can see a particular thing vampires can tend to go for, which I respect to some extent, even if I ultimately prefer something else. And it's this:

The more human a monster looks, the more threatening they are. The more inviting, the more reason to be cautious.

Not like that's the only theme that can crop up in a story with supernatural monsters. A theme like this certainly has its opposite in the visibly monstrous transformation, which the werewolf does approach more. Either the one with the most human visage is the one that's the height of danger, or the most threatening opponent changes to a more visibly monstrous form. Your classic Final Fantasy villain going [One-Winged Angel](#), if you will.

But back to vampires staying more human. Supernatural edges aside, they seem to often mimic predatory humans – and yes, particularly sexually predatory ones. “Vamp” is a word in [Merriam-Webster](#) with similar meaning. Those that blend in and seduce with romantic and sexual overtones, or both. It's evident in a lot of episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It's there in the very first scene of its series premiere, though with a gender-flip – the trope of the teen boy with one thing on his mind, and he's drained dry by Darla, the vampiric woman playing herself up as an ingenue that had perhaps enticed him as an easy date. But after getting to know Darla later, one can imagine her simply using a different tactic to seduce and deceive her target.



And after finally digging into Dracula media for the first time by listening to the podcast adaptation *Re: Dracula* – yes, I don't know much about what actually happens in the story of Dracula, or I hadn't before – I can appreciate how the most iconic vampire of all tries to blend in as another human while sinking his proverbial claws into Jonathan Harker. There is a creeping dread while I listen to the claustrophobic-feeling interactions between Dracula and Jonathan even though I've been spoiled by pop culture history enough to know that the vampire probably wants to eat him. Or turn him. Or both.

And perhaps vampires leaning more toward human shapes also say something about

humans themselves. Vampires as another metaphor for [humans](#) being the real monsters? I can buy it as a theme of the horror genre, one fictional message – though just a fragment, and not something that embodies the whole breadth and truth of humanity, but again, can make for a good horror story.

Also, more humanoid vampires can be a more palatable vision for genuine romance if *The Shape of Water* isn't someone's cup of tea. It doesn't have to all be deception and hunting with vampires. For instance, it's genuinely sweet and entertaining to watch Lisa and Dracula start bonding in the first episode of *Castlevania*.



#### iv. *But giant bats can be cool.*

Then there are some vampires or vampire-adjacent beings that dare to be different. Forget \*bats being cute as all heck, forget winged flight maybe being hard to realize in a fictional live-action medium resulting in some pop cultural impact later down the line, forget the unique themes of human-shaped monsters – just bring out the giant winged beast shapeshifting.

(\*Definitely have to diverge from real bats and get creative with making more warped designs, because as has been pointed out, real bats are adorable.)

Gary Oldman's Dracula back in the nineties definitely dared, with multiple beast transformations and a distinctly nonhuman, ironically wolf-like set of blood-red armor. (Dracula in general has quite a few wolf connections in addition to the pop culture rivalry.) And the lack of flight was a complete nonissue – just a few impactful min-

utes of a towering twisted [bat creature](#) proved more than enough. The film crew worked within their limits and made it so that Dracula's lack of flight doesn't even ruffle the imagined universe they've crafted. It's even more impressive as it was all created with practical effects.




Eiko Ishioka won an Oscar for Best Costume Design in honor of her work on ***Bram Stoker's Dracula***, which included the titular vampire's iconic armor. (Source: [Reddit](#).)

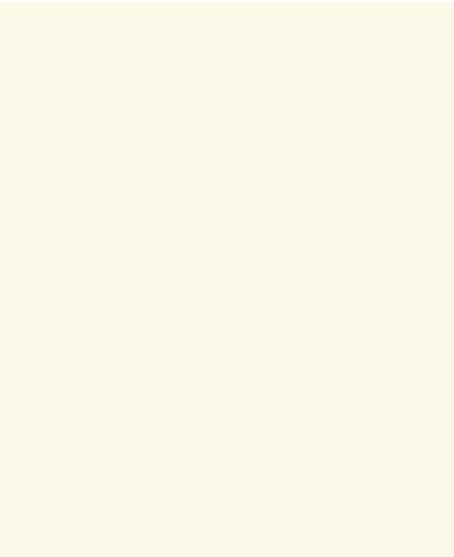
And on the opposite end time-wise, there's been something that's interestingly more recent – *The Last Voyage of the Demeter*. Which I did not see because I actually don't consider myself a horror fan even if I like some of the monsters like werewolves, the Xenomorph alien, the Cloverfield monster. I can just. Y'know. Look at pictures of them. Anyway, trailers and clips definitely indicate *Demeter* gives Dracula the bat wings and other twisted features without shrinking him to a real bat's size, which is a plus.

Chronologically in between those two, there's another Dracula getting a last-minute giant bat transformation in the grand finale battle with Hugh Jackman's *Van Helsing*, who turns into a werewolf. I remember their shapeshifting clash fondly as easily my favorite part of the movie. I'm just a sucker for one-on-one monster fights. Also, gotta be honest – *Van Helsing*'s werewolf still looks cooler. But this Dracula gets points alongside his second-place ribbon for the literal winged metamorphosis.



An honorable mention to [Man-Bat](#) in *Batman: The Animated Series*, which went all out with deciding to use that particular rogue for their very first episode and pulling it off beautifully in 2D animation. Also an honorable mention for [NOS-4-A2](#), who skyrockets to the upper reaches by virtue of him being a goddamned robot vampire. He feeds on other robots and electrical energy in general. He can seize control of those other robots. He can manipulate people's technological armor and puppet them around as long as they're trapped in their hacked suits. With the right bite under a certain irradiated moon, he can turn them into a robotic werewolf.

The shape of vampires could stretch and be more. But you know what? They could lean more into real-life bats being adorable too. And both would be good. Vampires can take on different shapes and vibes. Sky's the limit for these strange bat fellows. 





I PLAYED IT LIKE, TWICE... | **ORRIN GREY**

## WHAT YOU SEE IN THE DARK: NIGHT AND DAY IN VAMPIRE HUNTER

*I see board games in the store and they always look so cool and then I buy them and bring them home, I'm so excited to open them, and then I play them, like, twice... This column is dedicated to the love of games for those of us whose eyes may be bigger than our stomachs when it comes to playing, and the joy that we can all take from games, even if we don't play them very often.*

Released by Milton Bradley in 2002, *Vampire Hunter* is part of a robust tradition of battery-powered “electronic” board games – the most well-known of which might be *Operation*, first introduced in 1965, also by Milton Bradley. These assorted games incorporate their battery-operated components into the game in a variety of different forms, to an array of different effects. In *Operation*, of course, you remove jokey body parts from a patient using a pair of tweezers connected

to a cord. Touch the sides of the incision with the tweezers, and the game buzzes.

The electronic conceit in *Vampire Hunter* is simultaneously a relatively minor innovation and at the same time central to the game's play. The subtitle is “The Game That Transforms Before Your Eyes,” and the idea is simple: *Vampire Hunter* is a fairly straightforward board game with one exception – you play it in the dark. The only light is a plastic tower in the center of the game board, which changes color from red to blue when you push on the top of it.

When this happens, the game board changes accordingly. In normal light, the board looks a bit like it was printed in old-fashioned anaglyph 3D, with board elements represented in both blue and red ink. Naturally, when the red tower light is on, representing daytime, the red elements become invisible, and only the blue ones are shown.

Conversely, when the blue light is on, the opposite happens.

On each player's turn, they draw a card, which tells them whether it is day or night. If it is currently day (the light is red) and they draw a card that says "night," they hit the top of the tower and change the color of the light to blue, with the board and its various elements changing accordingly.

As you might imagine in a game that's about hunting a vampire, day is better for the players than night. When night falls, villagers turn into werewolves, clouds of mist become vampires and trap squares appear on the game board – the rules call them "pit traps," but they're represented by spider webs. In one of the more clever uses of this relatively simple gimmick, the die that players roll to move their character is also printed in two colors, meaning that your rolls are much higher in the daytime than they are at night.

Without the day and night conceit, the game is straightforward indeed. You move around a board, which is divided into four sections – a graveyard, a marsh, a dining room and a crypt; the four areas that all castles have. Within each of these are several tiles which you turn over as you approach them. Some are enemies, others are weapons. You'll need to collect one of each kind of weapon and reach the final area in order to slay the master vampire, whose name is Drakus (they were not trying terribly hard) before his boat arrives and he departs, presumably for England, given what we have to work with here.

Ostensibly, the player who finished Drakus off is the "winner," but really this is a purely co-op game in which players work against the board. In the same way, it says that it can accommodate 2 to 4 players, but could just as easily be played solo.

But would you want to? Eh, probably not really. Like many of the electronic games that live and die by their gimmicks, there isn't really much to *Vampire Hunter* besides that red/blue light trick. As a game, it plays pretty quickly and there's not a lot of variety. In fact,

you could handily memorize where the trap spaces are during the "daytime," making it easy to avoid landing on them at "night."


The real question with a game like this is less "how is the game" and more "how does the gimmick work?" And, again, the answer is a mixed bag. The basic idea here is similar to the trick that William Castle used in the original *13 Ghosts*, where looking at the screen through either red or blue filters made the ghosts appear or disappear. As in that case, it sounds more fun on paper than it really is in practice, though there's a real (if short-lived) pleasure to it in both. More damning here, though, is that the red/blue gimmick only works about half the time.

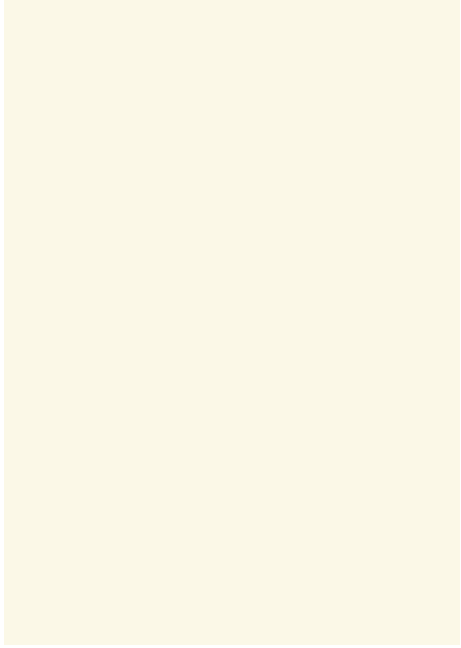
When what you're seeing is something that is simply printed in one color that appears or disappears with the changing lights (the trap squares, the different numbers on the die) it works like gangbusters, and there is a sense of magic to the extent that one thing vanishes and the other shows up. However, that's only about half of the two-color items involved in the game. Others superimpose two images over the top of one another, so that villagers transform into werewolves, or so that Drakus himself turns to bones and dust when he has been slain. These work considerably less well, with the dual images muddying one another, regardless of which light is shining.

There's one other, bigger problem with the core idea of *Vampire Hunter*, though. You're supposed to be playing in the dark, with only the tower light illuminating the board – though the instruction booklet does suggest maybe turning on some night lights so that you don't crash over something when you get up to go get a snack or whatever. And if there's too much ambient light, the two-color tower light won't do its job on the board elements. Problem is, at least in the version of the game I was playing, the light isn't really bright enough for that.

Sure, you can *kind of* see what's happening on the board, and the designers of the game were smart enough to make the bases of the

different vampire hunters different shapes, so you can quickly identify your character, even in the semi-dark. But if you want to make out what's on a tile when you turn it over, chances are you'll have to hold it up near the tower – especially if you want to really see the red/blue effect.

*Vampire Hunter* has been out of print for a while, for probably good reasons. It's not really worth tracking down. If, like me, though, you find a cheap used copy at a Half-Price Books, say, then it's a fun game to play, like, twice, especially around the Halloween season, when the idea of playing games in the dark takes on an added thematic resonance. 



**VAMPIRE HUNTER**  
**THE GAME**

THE GAME TRANSFORMS  
RIGHT BEFORE  
YOUR EYES!!

Villager by Day... Werewolf by Night

WHAT YOU SEE IN THE DAY...

...TURNS FRIGHTFUL AT NIGHT!

Ages 9 and up  
4 "C" Batteries Required  
(Not Included)

Always consult the instruction manual.

**MB**  
MINDYARD

The box art features a woman on the left and a boy on the right, both looking at a game board. The board is split into a daytime (red/orange) and nighttime (blue) side. A central tower is illuminated. The text 'Vampire Hunter: The Game' is at the top in a jagged, yellow font. The tagline 'THE GAME TRANSFORMS RIGHT BEFORE YOUR EYES!!' is in the top right. Below it are two small images: a woman and a werewolf, with the text 'Villager by Day... Werewolf by Night'. The bottom left has age and battery information. The bottom right has the MB Mindyard logo.



FRICION BURNS | **RUTH CASSIDY**

## NEVER TO RETURN

There is no perfect playthrough of *Pyre*: even if everything goes exactly the way you want it to, you are always compromising, and the best outcomes are often tinged bittersweet. It's a story of exiles fighting for their freedom, against opponents who want the exact same thing. It's a game where the companions best placed to be sent off to win a revolution are also your most practiced and skilled competitors. It's a journey where the characters you care about most deeply and want to see return home are also the ones you want to keep by your side.

These are the big picture tensions in Super-giant's less-loved 2017 game, and they shape it so that your first playthrough is unlike any playthrough that comes after. In the beginning, the narrative happens to you. The story continues through both failed and won rites, and your opponents change their relationships to you – and grow in strength as adversaries – when you meet them. Your choices feel less like choices, and more like reactions and adaptations to the twists and turns of fate. Growth, and struggle, are

organic: in its own words, the only failure is to stray from the path.

Once you know how these systems work, however, in any subsequent playthrough you can know exactly what compromises you want to make. Still compromises, still bittersweet and still working towards an ending that can never be perfect – but with skill, you can intentionally weave a narrative where you face your opponents, and say goodbye to your friends, on your own terms.

There's something to be said for the careful construction of an imperfect narrative – planning who stays behind, whose needs will be unfulfilled, and whose goals will be obstructed – but I missed that initial feeling of being at the narrative's mercy. This brings me to *Pyre*'s unlockable difficulty setting, where you can't reload checkpoints, and you have to choose increasing numbers of debuffs for your rites over time.

In theory, your successes can snowball in this mode, as winning a match with the debuffs on makes your characters level up




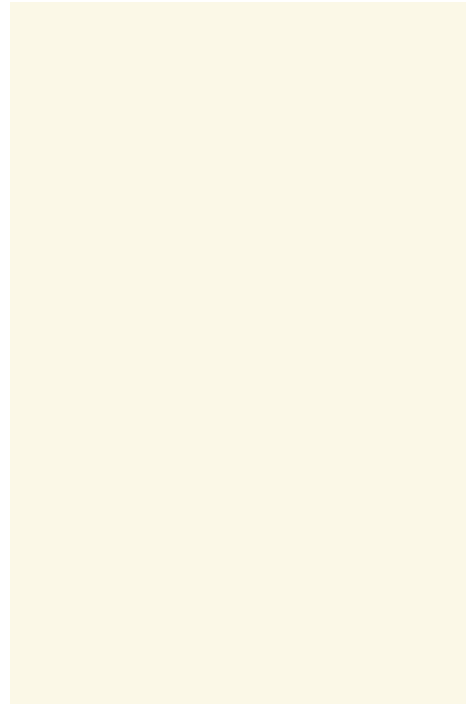
faster than they do on a standard win or lose – but while I’m good at *Pyre*, my reaction speed at fantasy basketball simply isn’t that sharp. My buffed opponents outperformed me, and as the losses stacked up, the skill gap only increased.

This didn’t quite take me back to that “first playthrough” experience of *Pyre* – for one, I was better even as an inexperienced player, but for another, I know its systems too well. I still found myself trying to shape the narrative, but this time while anticipating my losses, instead of wins. I was able to strategically seek out losses that would benefit opponents I liked better, or to ensure the worst people never had the chance to escape exile. If I couldn’t free any of my own friends, I could at least navigate the least worst outcome.

As I never intentionally threw a match, this made the rare wins sting. The rush of excitement, boosted by the accelerated swell of experience and the brief hope that maybe this would make the difference between now and the next rite – all mingled with the knowledge that any future failures would now have much worse consequences.

A regretful win isn’t unique to this specific playthrough – there are always opponents that it feels awful to see condemned to exile

at your hands – but it’s a strange inverse that’s unique to having reached the point of knowing the game particularly well. Winning doesn’t feel bad, here, because I beat a team I liked, in a run of crushing victories – but because I failed to lose, in a move that would have knock-on effects in three rite’s time. It feels like knowing *Pyre*’s secrets should remove its surface tensions, but a risk you know how to calculate just makes the gambles feel larger. 







THE HEAVY POUR | **SARA CLEMENS**

## **BELA LUGOSI IS DEAD**

The world looked alright when viewed with a little bit of a skewed perspective. At least Reggie's head felt nice hanging backwards off the bed. Blood poured into his brain, and he figured that had to be a good thing. He let his arms fall over his head where he could see them. Looking through his black-stained fingers at the bare white wall made him realize he should get something to hang there. The place where the wall met the ceiling looked like a floor. For a second, he indulged in a fantasy of floating belly up in the center of his one-room apartment, legs and arms outstretched, just Reggie in a pure white box.

He began to write his name in the air with one finger. If he could reach out and touch the wall, would a black smear remain? No. The grease and oil were embedded in his skin, not merely resting on the surface. He couldn't wipe it off on his coveralls. Water and soap – even Glycerin the Almighty – could not touch this indelible mark of Reggie's manhood. He spelled out his name: R - E - G - I - N - A - L - D, even though it had always been only Reggie, and the guys at the garage used to call him just "Reg." But

in the air with one eye closed he wrote an imaginary "Reginald" on the opposite wall, and if his fingers could leave marks his given name would be written upside-down on the clean whiteness, close to the ceiling-floor.

Reggie thought about his name as he rolled over onto his belly. No one had ever called him by it – he didn't quite fit the bill. "Reginald" seemed like some scrawny nerd, nose in a book, relentlessly bullied. Reggie was small, but he had never let anyone get the best of him. He knew boys had to be able to fight, especially small boys like him. When older guys at school would make fun of him for being little or for having skinny legs, telling him he should be wearing a skirt and grow his hair long, he'd allow his pride to hurt, then use the pain to regain it. He liked to think of himself as scrappy. And now he was a man; he fixed cars in a shop filled with other men fixing cars. And many times – most times – his work surpassed that of his colleagues. At the end of the day, he would look at his hands permanently blackened even after washing and see them marked with his own superiority.

Although he was an outstanding mechanic, Reggie never truly gained the admiration of the guys at the shop. He wanted it. These were real guys, the guys who knew of engines and metal and oil, who used their own bodies to wrench sparks and life from the body of an otherwise dead thing. At the end of the day, they would go home to the soft bodies of their wives; wrestle and play with those of their children, the bodies that prickle with energy under the surface. And sometimes the men could bring sparks and life from the bodies of their families, which in turn sparked something internal to theirs. Reggie knew these guys to be real Men. He admired them.

The guys knew Reggie possessed real talent, but they didn't like the looks of him. He was off-putting. There had never been a girlfriend. He ate lunches put together by his own grease-stained fingers, not by the clean manicured ones of a wife. He also didn't possess the same barrel-chested, soft-bellied torso that most of the guys did, the kind capable of emitting laughs which could be heard across the garage. So, Reggie threw his small, reedy body into working and working well, only smiling at the guys' jokes. He wasn't a bastard or anything, he could tell when something was funny, but his laugh would only be lost in the echoes of rich, booming roars. Sometimes he fantasized about beating them. He liked them fine, and they left him alone for the most part. But his thoughts would oftentimes be broken up by images of his fist smashing their jaws, or his sharp knee forcing itself into their bellies.

Reggie's focus came back to his room and the bed, solidly existing underneath him. His muscles ached and his eyes were tired. He thought about grabbing a nap. He liked thinking about "grabbing a nap," as if it were something you could pick up and wash your face with. Instead, he turned and faced the window. Reddish, late evening sunshine cascaded through the leaves of the trees, in the process of mutating into their autumnal hues. A breeze made the curtains around his one window give the faintest of flutters, carrying the scent of dirt. He thought of graves

and death. Images of skeletal figures and gaping mouths filled with earth rose unbidden to his mind's eye until he shook his head to clear them. Oddly, he felt suddenly drawn outside. Why not? He figured a walk could only do him good.

His feet crushed dried leaves underneath them as he walked. Suddenly, he disliked hearing the noise and stopped moving. As Reggie stood still on the broken stone sidewalk he thought of the leaves as bodies drained, weak and brittle with aged death. Here were trees with their spinster's fingers, holding green leaves to the sky as if raising them for worship, all the while sucking the life from their veins. And yes, the leaves were beautiful as they died, perhaps more so than at the prime of their life. Eventually, though, they would fall to the cold earth and wait for some mechanic's boot to help their useless bodies return to the dust, leaving nothing but a crooked tree with its siphoning branches. Now that Reggie examined them, those branches began to look less like fingers and more like the gnarled fangs of some beast. Tauntingly, the wind swirled and dead leaves beat against his body.

Ahead of him a black dog trotted up the street, moving in the same direction he was. It was big and black with short, pointed ears and fur that looked as if it would be soft to the touch. Reggie liked dogs so he whistled and called to it. The dog didn't stop or respond to the sound. Reggie called to it again, and again the dog kept its steady gait. Reggie had an abrupt thought that perhaps the dog was old and deaf, and felt sorry for it. He quickened his own pace with the hope of catching up. But the dog reached the end of the block before he was even close and decided to turn the corner. Before it did, it turned and looked at Reggie. He saw yellow eyes at the end of a pointed snout which made him stop moving again. Reggie didn't think it was a dog after all. A coyote? Sometimes coyotes came into town to scrounge around in trash cans or pick off an old mutt. Not big and black, though. Finally, the animal turned the corner and walked down a side street.

Reggie thought about turning around and going home, but instead just stood and waited a moment. It didn't seem too interested in him anyway; he'd just wait a second and give it time to get farther away. His mind wandered to the leaves again, and again he was beset with flashes of bodies decaying. He blinked hard and started to move forward. He walked slowly up the block, trying to keep his thoughts to cars and their guts. When he reached the corner, he looked down the street where the animal had gone. It had disappeared, but there was a man.

The man was standing in the middle of the sidewalk about halfway down the block, smoking a cigarette. He was wearing a black overcoat, nicer than anything owned by anyone Reggie knew. The man was very tall – over six feet at least – and thin. But Reggie could tell he was well-muscled. He was staring down the street, his back to Reggie. Reggie approached cautiously, but glad of being in the presence of another human. For a few silly moments he had felt as if he and the dog were the only alive things on Earth. He made a move to greet the man but something grabbed him in the pit of his stomach when he opened his mouth to speak. Sometimes he had trouble making conversation. When he was a kid, he would sometimes whisper what he wanted to say under his breath before speaking, just to make sure he could get it out when it counted. Reggie swallowed and tried again.

The stranger's smooth voice interrupted his stymied attempts at communication, "Did you see that?" He had a slight, unplaceable accent.

The man didn't turn as he spoke. He took a puff from his cigarette, flicked the ash into the street. Reggie hesitated. Again, his mouth went dry. A nervous laugh chokingly escaped from him, then he finally pulled his tongue from the roof of his mouth.

"That dog a second ago?"

"Yes."

"I did see it, yeah. Was it a dog, though?"

"I don't know." The timbre of the man's voice was nice, which put Reggie at ease.

"I thought it was a dog until I saw its eyes."

"Hmm." Another draw from his cigarette, "no."

"No?"

"No, I don't think it was a dog, now that you mention it."

The man put out his cigarette and finally turned towards Reggie. His thick black hair was tidily combed straight back from a high forehead. Reggie couldn't tell how old he might be. His skin was smooth and pale as a girl's. He looked at Reggie with golden-brown eyes framed by long black lashes.

The man let a tiny smile flicker across his red mouth before giving Reggie a little nod. "What's your name?" He still had a nice voice.

"Reggie."

The man's lips split into an impossibly wide grin. Reggie's stomach grabbed at him again.

"Reginald?"

For some reason, Reggie recoiled at the sound of this golden-voiced stranger saying his full name, the name that not even his mother used when he was in trouble.

"Just – Reggie." He stared at the man's mouth and teeth. White and clean and perfect; each one the precise shape of whichever tooth, like the drawings on posters at the dentist. So many. Reggie found his focus drawn entirely to the man's smile. He thought, for some reason, about being inside that mouth. Shrinking himself down to sparrow-size; hopping inside the dark wet.

The man's grin twitched, "just Reggie, then." Reggie's head was suddenly flooded with dead leaves and the whereabouts of the dog-thing. The wind kicked up again and leaves slapped his face. Some instinct inside his legs told them to run. But he remained. This was just some man, some guy who was new in town and had an overcoat that was too nice and interesting teeth. Some people had eyes that were two different colors. His teeth were beautiful.

Reggie pulled his gaze away from the man's mouth and allowed his eyes to trace the lines of his high cheekbones. Their eyes met. Dark brown irises with pupils ringed by flared gold caught the red light of the setting sun. The voice of smoke:


"Just Reggie."

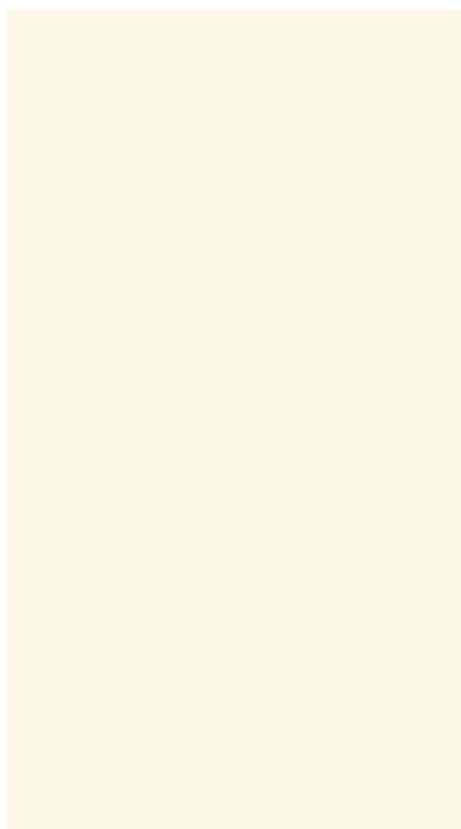
Heat spread throughout Reggie's body; he heard his name said in a thousand inflections, a clamor of howls and whispers. All of them said by one voice, the voice that moved from the speaker's lips like late-night mist. He thought he might faint, or perhaps just die. He saw himself falling into the arms of this stranger, who would be more than strong enough to lift him from the ground; strong enough to cradle him like a child; strong enough to bear him like a lover.

Reggie compelled his eyes to see reality. He strained to find the claw-fingered trees, the broken stone sidewalk, the deepening purple of the sky, the black dog, anything that might bring him back to his own existence. He found only the man's dark eyes boring into his unblinkingly. Crinkled at the corners, so he knew the man was smiling.

Again, Reggie's mind was infiltrated with images of the man carrying him, telling him things would be fine, urging him to relax. Reggie wanted to go with him, to focus on nothing but that smooth skin, those long eyelashes, that red mouth and those perfect teeth. He yearned to hear that voice say his name again.

Whatever had been grabbing at Reggie's stomach suddenly found something to hold. Anger and shame motivated his arms to swing savagely outward. He anticipated viciously ripping the skin from the man's beautiful cheekbone. His right hand, a gnarled claw – no time to concentrate on making a fist – failed to connect with the stranger's porcelain face. The man had seized Reggie's wrist mid-air with his own graceful hand. His dark eyes never left Reggie's. They stayed that way a moment, tension flowing from one body into the other, then the stranger let him go. Reggie's hand stayed in the air next to the ivory cheek. He knew that if he tried to touch it now the man wouldn't stop him.

He relaxed his fingers and laid his palm against the man's sharp features. Reggie's eyes closed, finally breaking their interlocking gaze. He thought of white teeth, a voice smooth like glass. He heard the wind, the rustling of dead leaves, a low howl. As he let himself fall into the sounds, he felt the stranger's breath enter his own lungs. 





# CAMPFIRE CARNRGE CONJURES THE REAL MONSTERS

FEATURING VALKYRIE T. LOUGHCREWE

by Oluwatayo Adewole

*This series of articles is made possible through the generous sponsorship of Exalted Funeral. While Exalted Funeral puts us in touch with our subjects, they have no input or approval in the final story.*

Created for the horror RPG *Squishy!*, *Campfire Carnage* is an adventure that takes you deep into the woods to face monstrosities, serial killers, radioactive waste, unruly campers and everything else you'd expect from an homage to one of horror's creepiest settings.

*Squishy!* is a game that's designed to be easy to pick up, with a clear layout, only six stats to worry about and no sprawling list of rules to follow. It's also just a fun one to look at, with

bold art throughout. This adventure follows the same philosophy – easy to pick up and flick through, providing a loose framework for GMs and players. The relative ease with which this can be picked up is something that’s key to its writer Valkyrie T. Loughcrewe and has been a part of *Squishy* since its inception.

“*Squishy!* was born out of a time I had to run a game of [*Call of Cthulhu*] and nine people showed up, so I just invented a quick way to make characters to save time on filling out those *Cthulhu* character sheets.”



You’ve got clearly laid out random tables, spooky but straightforward descriptions and plenty of room to add your own spin on things throughout – or as Loughcrewe puts it: “It is a game that you can go from ‘you guys wanna play an RPG?’ to actually playing the game in a matter of minutes.”

While the structure of *Campfire Carnage* is fairly straightforward, Loughcrewe and company pack a lot into the bestiary, and the adventure ends up being a sprawling forest-horror pastiche which could make for some very different adventures depending on what you lean into. There’s room for some *Blair Witch*-style terror, or even some *Predator*-esque action, through to a more conventional slasher. Despite the range on offer in their adventure, Loughcrewe’s focus was “primarily a slasher template, where every location could tell a bit more of a story about the slasher, or offer a set piece right out of a *Friday the 13th* movie.”

The range of striking artwork here helps build the creepiness up here. The lines are scratchy and intense, the colors distorted, with some genuinely terrifying visuals from a range of artists. In many ways it feels like a collection of semi-haunted drawings you'd find in the wake of some paranormal activity. A lot of the work is cheeky, pulling on the tongue-in-cheek nature of the best slashers and turning camp signage/promotional material into something darkly funny. Holding playfulness and fear factor in concert is sort of key to the energy of the whole adventure. While there is certainly room for an entirely self-serious playing of this, I think there's an inbuilt ridiculousness – like how you could theoretically end up fighting the junk-mech of the leader of a meth-dealing gang nestled away in the forest.



Creating fear in a tabletop context is no mean feat. There isn't the benefit of Dutch angles or surround sound. Also, without railroading your players, you don't have the capacity for a very singular authorial vision which marks horror novels and short stories. That lack of complete control and in-built randomness reconfigure what it means to make horror. For Loughcrewe, creating fear at the table is "highly contextual," but the key for the games they run and design "is to create a setting that feels concrete, familiar and grounded, with a lot of potential for dynamic play and a lot of room for horrible things to hide."

The randomness introduced by the dice roll means that there are new avenues of creating tension for both the referee and players. While you can be guided by prep, your fate ultimately lies in the dice roll – which produces a very unique dynamic. This constant interplay of risk and reward is key to how Loughcrewe wants to encourage players to delve into the horrors of *Campfire Carnage*, but also to encourage refs

to really choose the moments where rolls happen to make them matter. "Dice rolls should be climaxes, only utilized when no other recourse is available but a risky gambit."

Of course, the horrors can never really be contained to the table. We live in a world full of environmental disasters and the monstrosities they create. Horror is often a means by which those anxieties can be expressed, and pushed to heightened levels. It's one thing to wax lyrical about the sins of humanity at large and another to recognize the specific failures that occur and the ideologies directly responsible. Between the standard forest horror fare there is a subtle political undercurrent throughout. The police and government security forces don't have your best interests at heart, community spaces lie neglected, the forest is furious.



More specifically, there's a clear parallel between the release of toxic material into public waters by privatized companies in the UK (where the adventure is loosely set), with the release of irradiated waste being key to the strange happenings in the setting. For Loughcrewe, this political ecology came naturally: "I live in Ireland, one of the most ecologically devastated places on earth ... It's difficult as a person who actually thinks about history and the real world from a realistic perspective, i.e., a leftist one, to not touch on elements of ecology and colonialism when it comes to forest horror." *Campfire Carnage* isn't exactly a manifesto, but it's fun to see work that knows where the real horrors come from and where to point the finger.



Loughcrewe sees potential for “campsite as being for horror games what a dungeon is to fantasy”, an iterative space through which you can tell all sorts of stories, whether that’s making use of the randomizer table to create a different site every time, or building your own locations with the tools available. There’s something really fun in thinking about this adventure through that lens, the campsite and the forest as a creepy place to be returned to again and again without requiring huge amounts of complicated set-up. After all, what’s a slasher without endless sequels?

\* \* \*

*Get the Squishy! core rules and Campfire Carnage from Exalted Funeral!*





# KILLING THE VAMPIRE

by ELIJAH GONZALEZ



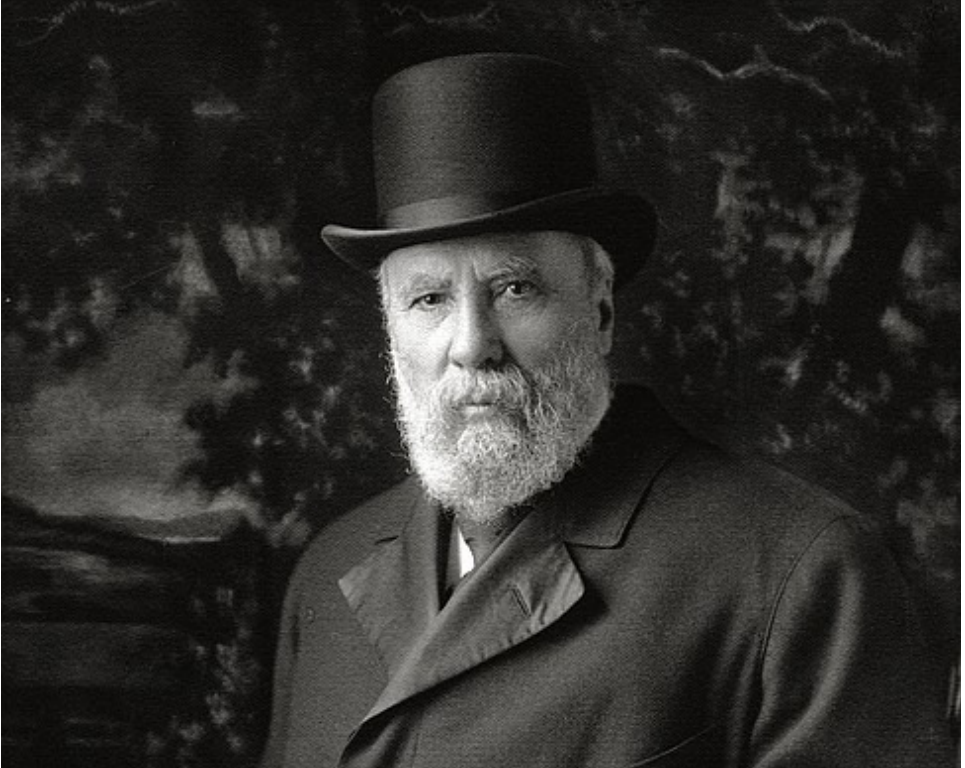


Across their centuries of existence, tales about vampires have taken on almost every form imaginable. The gothic stylings of *Dracula*, with its inky bed chambers and midnight incursions, cast a long shadow, but this is just one framing among many in modern pop culture. We've seen contemplations on the ennui of living forever (*Only Lovers Left Live*), high school drama (*Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*), metaphors for gentrification (*Vampires in the Bronx*), explorations of sexuality and sexual desire (like, all of them) and racial allegories where the vampires are the oppressors, oppressed or a cipher for the author's xenophobic views. However, as wealth disparity has become increasingly unavoidable in our late-capitalist hellworld, one of these fanged menaces' most ubiquitous representations has come back into vogue, that is, as a stand-in for an exploitative ruling class.

This depiction is a common one, and throughout the first volume of *Das Kapital*, Marx used vampires as a metaphor for how

the capitalist class feasts on the labor of workers. Later, the iconography of Count Dracula would strengthen the cultural connection between these creatures and exploitative elites by portraying a blood-thirsty noble who sustains himself off the lives of the peasantry. Horror has long been used to work through latent fears, and in this incarnation, the vampire represents animosity toward those who abuse their economic and political power.

Although framing our anxieties through fiction can be cathartic, particularly when the hunted protagonist drives a stake through the heart of their assailant, this style of narrative tends to be intimate in a way that makes these victories personal instead of structural. As the sun rises, the singular monster may turn to ash, but the specter of their terror remains. That said, there is a story that takes a different tack, one that never explicitly mentions vampires but nonetheless uses battles against life-force-sucking foes to convey systemic change: *Xenoblade Chronicles 3*.



The latest entry in Monolith Soft's line of sprawling sci-fi RPGs takes us to Aionios, a land trapped in endless war. Its two sides, Keves and Agnus, are made up of child soldiers who must harvest their enemies' life force to keep themselves and their comrades alive. The organization Moebius and its ageless Consuls pull the strings of this conflict, ensuring neither side wins so the world remains trapped in stasis.

As we learn more about the truths of this place and how it operates, it becomes increasingly clear that the Consuls are this narrative's vampires. On a surface level, they certainly look the part: they don't age, their crimson armor resembles Dracula's costume from the beginning of Coppola's '92 flick, they have pale, unchanging visages, many of them speak in condescendingly loquacious soliloquies and they can transform from an initially human appearance into hulking monsters with pointed fangs. Their central den is a dilapidated amphitheater that floats improbably in the middle of a giant mechan-

ical orb, the contrast between this futuristic setting and their lair drawing attention to their gothic roots.

Beyond these superficial qualities, Moebius is comprised of vampires because they subsist off the lives and labor of those under their thrall. The Consuls live forever by consuming energy emitted by Kevesi and Agnian soldiers who die during this manufactured conflict, creating an endless rule over an unchanging land (appropriately, the Moebius symbol is an infinity sign). This war grants them sustenance and a means for maintaining the status quo, guaranteeing that those with common goals are too busy killing one another to realize who their true foe is.

To further undermine solidarity, Moebius has divided the Kevesi and Agnian armies into regiments called colonies, which are indirectly pitted against one another. The members of each are tied to a Flame Clock, a measurement of how much life they've extracted from their slain enemies. If this



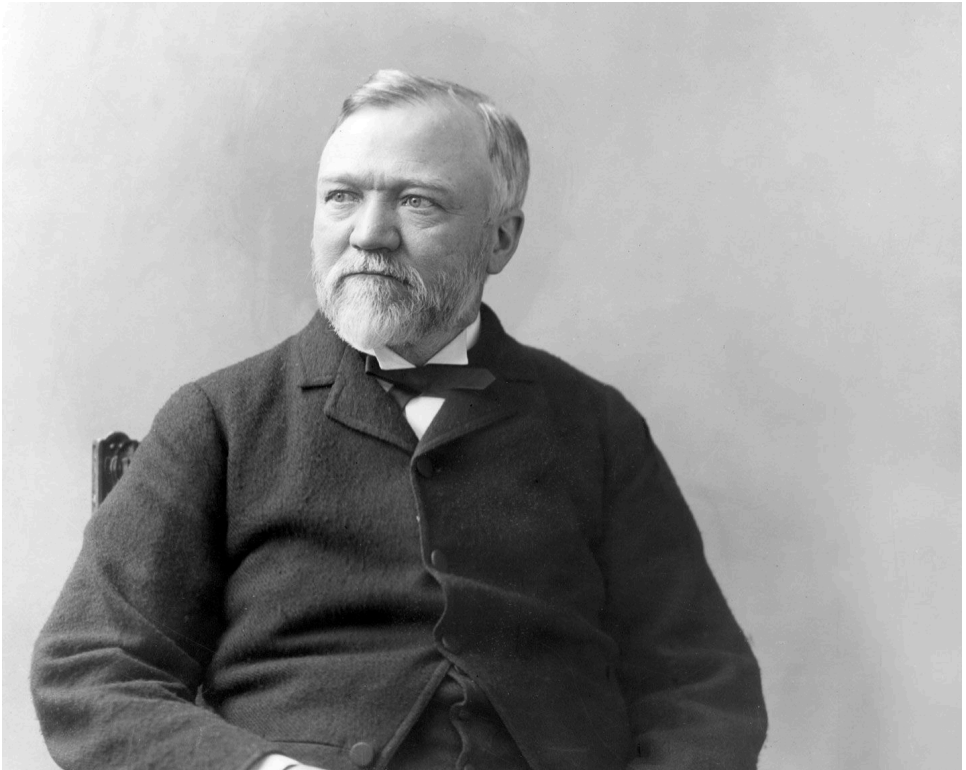
resource runs out, everyone in that colony will die, making it necessary to continue seeking out battles. This system further incentivizes them to kill as these squads are graded based on their performance, and higher achievers are given improved rations, supplies and the promise that if they reach the top rank, they will be excused from more fighting. The reality is that when they achieve the pinnacle, the Consuls will wipe them out for being a potential threat and because these ghouls describe the life force of "ripened" soldiers as particularly delectable.

It all works as a not-so-subtle metaphor for how our economic structures threaten us with death and destitution, turning us against each other over the empty promise that if we buy into the system, we could be the next one on top. Agnian and Kevesi toil accumulates in the Flame Clocks like capital as the Consuls feast on the dead labor of their underlings. Through all these efforts, Moebius has created a space that is

stuck, or the "endless now," as their leader, Consul Z, puts it.

Adding to their vampiric qualities, most of the organization's members were once human. Some defected to satiate their sadistic desires, others for control and many more to avoid the inevitability of death. A few even struggled against their overlords until they were beaten down by the sheer scale of their domination. Like many who control the levers of power in the real world, they seek to maintain the status quo and fend off change to perpetuate their vice grip, occasionally recruiting outsiders to their ranks to further demoralize their comrades. However, while *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* begins in an undeniably grim place, this is fundamentally a story about revolution and the possibility for change.

The six who help lead this rebellion, Noah, Mio, Lanz, Eunie, Sena and Taion, are former Kavesi and Agnian soldiers who, by pure chance, are gifted the power of



Ouroboros. This ability allows them to transform into beings that can match the Consuls in a fight, but most importantly, it also frees them from their Flame Clocks. Although they initially shy away from their responsibilities due to past indoctrination, the people of the City, a group of freedom fighters outside Moebius' influence, teach them how to live unbound by the current system.

Many RPGs grant their heroes magical powers that allow them to kill some great evil and save the day, but here, our protagonists' greatest ability is to liberate others from oppressive political structures. On their journey to topple Moebius, they shatter numerous Flame Clocks, freeing these colonies from endless war. This isn't just a story about the heroes slaying a nefarious monster (in this case, bloodsucking immortals), but one where they help plant the seeds of collective action that will ward off these fiends in perpetuity. Throughout their adventure, our heroes build a multi-racial/ethnic alliance between these previously warring sides, and

this combined strength is what makes their ultimate stand against Moebius possible.

In many cases, our perspective characters learn from those they rescue, such as from the members of Colony Iota, who devise a method of resource sharing. When explaining how this will work, one of the liberated soldiers uses the term mutual aid to describe how, from now on, freed colonies will grant each other resources in times of need. In response, Eunie expresses she got the message by paraphrasing Marx's famous maxim, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," about how communist societies should ensure that surplus abundance makes it to those who need it most. Support isn't a one-way street in this case, and we see how this kindness comes back around to help our protagonists and the rest of these communes.

These instances of community building, cooperation and mutual aid aren't just background themes but an omnipresent focus

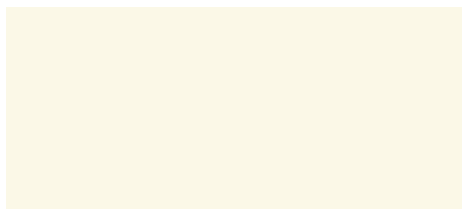


that colors every element of the experience. Almost all the sidequests are dedicated to liberating colonies from the Flame Clocks, deprogramming people from their past obligations or helping them build relationships with the other former victims of this system. During battles, pairings of characters who used to be on opposing sides of the conflict must literally combine to achieve their strongest forms. In *Future Redeemed*, a DLC add-on, we see how this rebellion is a generational project. The past wielders of Ouroboros honed this ability across centuries as countless users chipped away at the beast, paving the way for a victory they would never see.

At the start of this story, Moebius' vampiric might feels incorrigible. They had crafted a near-perfect engine of exploitation where the denizens of Aionois were conditioned to kill one another in a meaningless conflict as the Consuls consumed their labor and their lives. At one point, Consul Z explains that his organization only exists because, deep

down, the populace fears change. Moebius reifies the anxiety that while the current system is abysmal, attempts to alter it may lead to something worse.

However, *Xenoblade Chronicles 3* rejects the pessimism of an unchanging world. Through liberation and community, its heroes find a way to lift this shroud and make others genuinely believe that building something better is possible. In the end, they combine their strength with those they've saved to pierce the flesh of their enemy, not only vanquishing these particular monsters, but also the fear, doubt and stasis of their rule. By foregrounding principles of collective action and realizing a revolution against seemingly irreversible power structures, this is a vampire tale with a very different kind of ending. 🦋



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### ***Illustrations***

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