Abstract

Roleplaying games have always leaned heavily on their literary sources. System mechanics and character creation options have been tooled toward evoking genre types and aesthetics ever since the first “Vancian wizard” memorised a spell before setting out to adventure.

Naturally, when RPGs turned toward the Gothic, they did the same thing: riffing off the assembled archetypes and stereotypes of myth, film and literature to create an infrastructure of characters for players to occupy and navigate.

This paper - based on research that informs the Gothic Roleplaying chapter of Palgrave’s upcoming *Handbook of the Gothic* - will explore the most overtly Gothic RPG yet designed, analysing two different approaches to establishing a framework of archetypes that will be familiar to players while also curating a particular aesthetic mood.

*Vampire: the Masquerade* bakes literary references into its heavily stereotyped clans and sects, strongly associating the two and extending the game experience step by step into new and broader territories.

*Vampire: the Requiem* presents five recognisable archetypes, more clearly derived from particular mythic, filmic or literary concepts of the vampire, and five thematic political groups that interact with them in a way offering greater variety.

This paper will establish the Gothic credentials and objectives of the two games in their own terms, explore how the playable character options embody and serve the games’ vision of the Gothic, and proceed toward a classic ‘compare and contrast’ conclusion, looking at how successive editions of the games have modernised these archetypes to meet evolving perceptions of what exactly Gothic roleplaying should be.
Introducing Vampire

For many years board games [frequently based on Dracula] were the only vampire games, but in the 1990s, they were joined by a variety of what have been termed role-playing games...
Melton (2012)

What happened in the 1990s? The same cultural turn, the same reimagining of the vampire that [Sorcha Ní Fhlainn] (Sorika Knee Line) (2017) explores in terms of television:

In light of postmodern cultural turns, there exists an imperative to re-evaluate, satirize and reflexively explore the vampire as a necessary and evolving stock gothic character within the narrative and generic frameworks of each show [or, in this case, game].

…these understudied yet apposite representations of the vampire, prior to and following on from the success of Coppola’s Bram Stoker’s Dracula in 1992, documents a distinct cultural shift and maturation in representing vampires.

Melton (2012) draws a similar thread to this from Dungeons and Dragons’ module ‘Ravenloft’ (1982), the first roleplaying game supplement to feature a vampire as central antagonist, and on to Chill, a game centred on vampire hunters in the contemporary world. The early 1990s saw ‘Vampire Kingdoms’, a supplement for the all-in no-concept-left-behind cross-genre fantasy game Rifts (1991) and the splatterpunk extravaganza Nightlife (1990), as well as an RPG spinoff of the 1992 film Bram Stoker’s Dracula.

However, the biggest name in the vampire game was undoubtedly Vampire: the Masquerade, released in 1991, with live action rules following in 1993. Peter Ray Allison describes the game’s reimaginative thrust thus:

Rather than the traditional view of vampires being creatures of the night that lurked in gothic castles, Vampire: the Masquerade presented them as modern-day beings that existed on the fringes of society, veiled under a facade of humanity.

In Vampire: the Masquerade, players took on the role of a vampire from one of thirteen clans. This defined the character’s vampiric powers. In addition to their character’s health, players also needed to keep track of how much blood their vampire had, as well as their character’s Humanity - a measure of how closely the vampire clings to human values.
When discussing the impact of Vampire: the Masquerade, Allison claims that while the game had most impact within roleplaying gamer culture and PC game development,

the real influence of Vampire: the Masquerade is much wider and further. Films like Underworld and Blade share structural and aesthetic similarities with Vampire: The Masquerade to the extent that White Wolf, the game's publisher, took Sony Pictures to court for 17 counts of copyright infringement (the case was eventually settled before trial). “You can see key concepts about vampires that are now expected, even taken for granted, that originated in the roleplaying game appearing quite visibly in other vampire games, films and television shows” says [Jason] Carl, [product developer and public face for the current incarnation of White Wolf].

In 2004, as Allison, Melton and a generation of fans, players and bloggers have noted, Vampire: the Masquerade was wrapped up, delivering its long-promised apocalypse.

Its successor, Vampire: the Requiem was published in 2005, and - while reusing the same basic themes and many of the same terms - updated the mechanics and presented a different take on the idea that vampires are among us, on the fringes of our society.

Since then, the intellectual property of Vampire - both versions - has changed hands several times, and led to a flurry of products produced under various brand names by various creative teams under various licences.

To cut a long and torturous story short, Vampire: the Masquerade is now back in print, as both a compiled anniversary edition of the original game - V20 to its fans - and as a new, fresh start which advances that game's plotline into the present day and represents a return to the more intimate scale and scope of the early days, known as V5. Vampire: the Requiem is also still in print, a parallel intellectual property with many similarities and crucial differences.

It's easy to wonder - what's the point of keeping both lines out there? After all, if you put a bunch of Vampire players in a room, sooner or later someone's going to ask the inevitable question: which one's better?

Quite a few of the answers go into a specific territory about what particular editions of Requiem or Masquerade do better or worse. Requiem is a player's game; Masquerade is a storyteller's game. Requiem has a more complex set of political relationships; Masquerade has a more impactful storyline that drives and reifies those relationships in play.

One thing they certainly do differently is construct the clans, the different kinds of vampires that exist in their game worlds and are vaguely analogous to character classes in other roleplaying games. The games reimagine vampires in distinct directions, drawing on a similar body of inspirational tropes from film, literature and myth, but putting them to different ludonarrative purposes.
Speaking very broadly, the thirteen clans of Masquerade are stereotypes; the five clans of Requiem are archetypes.

The stereotype is a set of assumptions about an individual or group, based on observable commonalities of behaviour, culture, identity and so on between similar people, and frequently an amount of prejudice on the part of the observer. In literary terms, the stereotype is a stock character, a function of narrative or aesthetic, who needs to be transformed into a rounded and developed individual by creative labour.

The archetype, meanwhile, is a universal paradigm, a model of a type of thing, a common pattern with extensive recognition - the term itself is derived from the Greek word for origin. The archetype does not represent a functional role, but an emblem which symbolises some facet of human nature - or, in this case, vampire legend.
Vampire: the Masquerade - stereotypes and worldbuilding ease

Time for the info dump.

Vampire: the Masquerade has thirteen clans - some of which map to recognisable literary or filmic vampires, some of which “vampirise” other sets of signifiers from pop culture and, in one case, a previous game.

Each clan is characterised by a set of vampiric powers called Disciplines that are easier for members to learn, by a shared mechanical weakness or Bane, and a shared identity in the eyes of the other clans. A Vampire: the Masquerade character’s identity exists in a web of stereotypes, against which the individual vampire strains for distinction, but which the nature of the game consigns them to with the game-mechanical constraints that define their competencies.

Let’s consider a handful of the clans, starting with three of the seven “core” - the first to be developed, the first to be encountered in each edition of the game, and often the only ones to receive full rules in the core rulebook. Each of these clans is designed to fulfil a particular function in the simulated vampire society, and a particular role in the stories players create together, and a particular tactical role within gameplay to boot.

- The Ventrue, for example, are literally built to lead. Their stereotypes associate them with wealth and power; their Discipline set reifies that by affording them influence and direct control over other characters, as well as personal protection; their weakness evokes a fondness for the finer things, a sense of exquisite taste.

- The Nosferatu’s power set is particularly suited to espionage - they want to stay hidden anyway, since their hideous visage means they automatically fail any mechanical challenge where personal appearance is a factor, and they’re very good at it. Their command over animals allows them to recruit vermin as agents, even possessing animal bodies. They’re also strong enough to carry out sabotage and assassination if they have to.

- The Brujah share that physical prowess, but take it to a further level with access to a Discipline that allows them more attacks, more effective self-defence and faster movement, and the same intimidation and influence power as the Ventrue. They’re designed not to control, but to aggress - socially or physically - and their cultural stereotype makes them firebrands, progressives, activists and anarchists.

The same is true of the other “core” clans - the Gangrel stereotype of outlander and hunter, the Malkavian as jester and insane seer, the Toreador as aesthete and conscience, the Tremere as court magician.
In a similar way, the antagonistic clans aligned with a faction called the Sabbat, and the independent clans whose allegiances are more negotiable all have their stereotypes built into their mechanics.

For example, the two Sabbat clans both come with a unique, powerful and horrifying Discipline with at least one power that increases their combat prowess, making it simple to design a “boss fight” using these clans (and to create a powerful combatant for the more high-octane ‘war party’ games which feature Sabbat characters as playable). One, the Lasombra, are described as the heart of the faction - the other, the Tzimisce, as its soul. Tactical management and spiritual leadership roles - ductus and priest, the roles essential to the functional pack of brutal doomsday cultists - can be assigned along these stereotypical lines. Both clans also comes with an alternative set of morality mechanics which characterise and define their monstrosity - the Lasombra’s Path of Night is a cruel, authoritarian neo-Catholic dogma, while the Tzimisce’s Path of Metamorphosis is aggressively transhuman to a point far exceeding amorality.

The same is true of the Independent clans, with the goal being to make them innately alien and ‘other’, with actual hostility as a distinct possibility. The Independents’ stereotypes align them with specific criminal or immoral functions, but not the out and out warfare personified by the Sabbat. The Ravnos are thieves and tricksters; the Giovanni are mobsters and necromancers; the Assamites mercenaries and assassins, and the Followers of Set are smugglers and cult leaders.

(I feel obliged to add that the Independent clans are also the game’s most problematic stereotypes, since they are much more aligned with racial and cultural coordinates than the other clans: the Ravnos, for instance, are straight up ‘vampire gypsies’. These stereotypes were reproduced without much critical thought or insight. Later, attempts were made by the incoming developers of Revised edition Vampire: the Masquerade to correct for this unfortunate and unpleasant tendency, some more successfully than others - but they’ve always been correcting for an initial mistake.)

What all this means, in practical terms, is that members of each clan are designed to fill a particular ludonarrative function.

The default vampire society the game simulates is reminiscent of a Machiavellian city-state, with an undead Prince at its heart and various satellite functions - the Primogen who advise and contest the Prince’s governance, the Sheriff and/or Scourge who police the activities of undead citizenry, the Harpies who keep track of the grace and favour that bind vampire society together, and a few more.

The would-be Vampire: the Masquerade Storyteller can knock together a functional, stereotype-driven city for their players in a long afternoon. A Ventrue Prince, with a Tremere vizier and a Nosferatu spymaster and a pet Malkavian seer, a Toreador to hold the city’s social
scene together, and brooding Gangrel outlaws and Brujah anarchists as their loudest critics and political adversaries. If an immediate combat threat is desired, the Sabbat pack with its Lasombra ductus and Tzimisce priest is there on standby. The independent clans are there providing their black market services and secondary antagonists, depending on how far into their ideologies the Storyteller wants to lean and whether or not they want to work around the representative problems those clans bring to the table.

The individual characters the Storyteller creates will need to be rounded out, with appropriate personal Nature and Demeanour selected to start defining their personalities, but the capabilities of the clans suggest a hole into which their particular peg fits - by design.

While the later development of the game - in particular the fleshing out of the Sabbat into a playable faction - would provide counter-trends to these stereotypes, a counter-trend needs something to counter.
Vampire: *the Requiem* - archetypes and creative labour

Vampire: the Requiem is a bit different. Its five core clans correspond clearly to a particular filmic, literary or mythic archetype of the vampire. They share the same mechanical structure as their counterparts in the predecessor game - three Discipline powers, a particular Bane or weakness, a writeup that generalises how they might respond to each other, and in several cases the same names. However, their power sets are not so clearly aligned with particular functions of the game or its setting - none of them are transparently built to occupy a particular location and social or tactical role in the same way as the Masquerade clans.

Because they’re fewer in number and more recognisable in their sources and inspiration, I can afford to list the Requiem clans straight out:

- Daeva - superhuman speed, strength and charisma - penalised for failing to indulge in a specific vice - the sexy, glamorous, modern Anne Rice kind of vampire
- Gangrel - influence over animals and animalistic behaviours, shapeshifting, superhuman resilience - penalties apply to simulations of abstract, non-instinctive thought processes - savage, predatory, bestial at heart - think The Lost Boys or Buffy
- Mekhet - superhuman perceptions, speed and stealth - suffer additional damage from sunlight or fire - mysterious, scholarly conspirators who I think come from the same cultural place as Kostova’s The Historian, published in the same year as Vampire: the Requiem
- Nosferatu - magically induced fear/revulsion, superhuman stealth and strength - penalties apply to simulations of social scenarios, except intimidation - the Herzog and Kinski films of the same name, and Shadow of the Vampire.
- Ventrue - influence over animals and animalistic behaviours, direct hypnosis/mesmerism, superhuman resilience - accelerated ‘degeneration’, leading to accumulated mental illness and trauma over time as they become less ‘human’ - the classic literary vampire - Dracula, Lord Ruthven, Carmilla et al

The political scene of Vampire: the Requiem is superficially similar to that of Masquerade, in that most play settings are governed by a vampire Prince with advisors, enforcers and functionaries, but it features more complex and dynamic factional play.

As well as the clan into which they’re reborn, vampire characters in Requiem are aligned with a covenant: a social organisation which represents a particular political and often spiritual perspective on vampire existence. Catholicism, paganism, semi-mystical transhumanism, conservative and progressive politics all find themselves expressed within the context of vampire society - each one being a common metaphorical use of the vampire in the cornerstone texts in other media.
A Ventrue vampire who belongs to the Carthian movement - a progressive and modernising tendency among younger vampires - can be presumed to have a very different outlook to one who joins the Circle of the Crone - a sect of iconoclastic pagans driven to create, nurture and eliminate lives and works as a way of mitigating the stasis of being undead.

While the game does provide tendencies - the Daeva often gravitate to the conservative and authoritarian Invictus covenant - these are presented off-hand. There isn’t a clear mechanical advantage to being a Ventrue prince or a heavy-handed insistence that the majority of Brujah are anarchists. Joining a covenant affords the same mechanical advantages to characters from any clan - it doesn’t matter if you’re playing a Mekhet, a Nosferatu or a Gangrel, the Circle’s blood sorcery works the same way for all of them. Every clan has access to a mechanic which might make an effective leadership tool and no clan has access to a suite of leadership tools in the manner of the Masquerade Ventrue. Conflict exists between the factions, but not to the extent of out and out hostility - that is the remit of two strictly non-playable factions who barely receive any detailing in the game’s core rulebook.

The net effect of all this is to sift out the political and social behaviours which make up a stereotype, and place them in a different framework of possible choices to what kind of vampire a character is and what they’re mechanically good or bad at doing”. Clans don’t cleanly slot into an assumed context and role; instead, they provide an archetypal set of capabilities which are applied to a context and role by player choice. No clan or covenant is aligned with the machinery of power, with a default antagonistic or protagonistic role to be implemented or subverted.

Vampire: the Requiem offers a more open set of structured choices with which to define characters and their roles. Likewise, the settings in which they operate do not have an optimal occupant for each societal role. A Carthian Gangrel Prince is as viable as an Invictus Daeva, and there isn’t a sense that “no Gangrel would ever want to be inside the law like that”.

However, this greater nuance does have its drawbacks. In the absence of Masquerade’s stereotypical clan and role associations, designing and preparing a Vampire: the Requiem setting for play is a more labour-intensive process. There are no designed alignments between clan, faction and role for the storyteller and players to fall back on, no presumed conflicts which can be assumed are in play, and nothing particularly tuned for mechanically challenging ‘boss fights’. The game provides components but the ludonarrative ‘machine’ has to be bespoke, and that means Requiem demands significantly more creative labour from its players and storyteller.
Conclusion: what do you bring to the table?

The two games reimagine the traditional vampires of popular culture in similar ways, to suit distinct creative processes.

If you don’t have a story about vampires that you want to tell, Vampire: the Requiem won’t provide you with one. It’s a toolbox of literary and filmic vampire archetypes, each assigned to a clan, with common metaphoric uses for the vampire assigned to covenants. The game environment in which these archetypes will interact - the vampiric city-state - has only the vaguest of default social structures, meaning that the interplay of archetypes, purposes and character agendas has to be assembled from scratch by the troupe of players.

Vampire: the Masquerade, meanwhile, deals in stereotypes. Its vampire clans are built to serve a particular role in a more detailed default story, setting and social structure. They have stereotypical functions and positions within that structure, and their game mechanics are designed to fulfil those functions. The game provides a typical framework with allegiances, roles and driving conflicts mapped out for players in advance.

Rolling with those stereotypes allows troupes to prepare and run a game with ease. It might not be particularly original, and the harder it kicks against the game’s stereotypes, the less recognisable it’ll be as Vampire: the Masquerade - but it will allow troupes to focus their creative energy on building and interacting with characters and themes, rather than the more complex architecture of stories and situations.

The question is not and should never be which one’s better, but which one is more fit for purpose - given the energy, the preconceived ideas, and the time for creative labour that a given set of players bring to the table.
Works Cited


A Prepared Statement on Race and Such

I think Gothic does have a lot of Othering and Orientalism - that comes with the genre territory - and Vampire hasn’t handled that well.

The Ravnos in particular stand out as so problematic that the Revised edition of Vampire: the Masquerade effectively retconned them twice over, reframing them from stereotypical Gypsy tramps and thieves into the preeminent clan of India and then again into postapocalyptic survivors alienated from their own (problematic) legacy.

Here’s what I think about this. Role playing games are interactive media where the ‘canon’ produced by their creators is meant to serve as inspiration for transformative work, i.e. gameplay.

That affords us an opportunity to work with tropes and stereotypes like these. By including them as part of a genre project, the game allows groups to explore, subvert and challenge those tropes, and also remains honest about the problems inherent to its genre.

But: there are people out there who don’t think about these things. They treat the Vampire material as ‘canonical’ text to be consumed and adhered to, not transformed. I think Vampire has marketed to those people, produced texts that are meant to be read rather than being played and played with. And by doing that, Vampire has backed itself into a corner where it’s just doing representation, as though it were in a more traditional and passive medium. If you just read this stuff, it’s straight-up racist, because it’s regurgitating those tropes and stereotypes without doing the work of critiquing them.

I’m interested in how V5 is going to handle the Independent clans - because so far it seems all of them have been substantially retooled and recontextualised. That may address the lingering racism at their conceptual roots, or it may end up making the same mistakes in a more subtle way. We shall see.
Jon Garrad is a former teacher, recovering political campaigner, and reluctant something-in-marketing, who's just started his PhD on death and ludonarrative harmony at Manchester Metropolitan University.

He's written and presented on the necessary evil of necromancy in medieval Catholicism, E.R. Eddison and postwar modernism, Gothic coordinates in World of Warcraft, avatar-protagonism in games based on Frankenstein, and the challenge of adapting Lovecraft's defeatist milieu for games you can actually win.

His reviews have appeared in Vector and Mythlore, and he continues to livestream and release video essays on an irregular basis.