

MODERN-DAY DRACULA

A monster playset for Fear of the Unknown by Kent M. Beeson

*Disclaimer: This playset was **not** developed by Thomas Eliot, creator of the Fear of the Unknown ttrpg (www.FearOfTheUnknownRPG.com)*

OVERVIEW

Vampires! Vampires are possibly the most classic monster in the world; nearly every culture in the world has some kind of vampire myth. Oddly, while the *Fear of the Unknown* core rulebook lists thirty-six different movies as inspirations in the Videography section, not a single one is a vampire movie. The Modern-Day Dracula playset is intended to correct for that omission, and provide advice for playing out stories with a vampire Antagonist.

A reminder: the *Fear of the Unknown* system works as written! Everything provided here is optional. If your games are fun for you and your players, go with what works.

Throughout the playset, the Antagonist is referred to as "the Vampire" with a capital "V"; a lowercase "vampire" can refer to either the Vampire or one of their vampire spawn.

There are some assumptions built into the playset that need to be made clear.

- This playset simulates a specific kind of vampire movie, where a present-day vampire (either a charismatic newcomer or a recently-unleashed monster) begins victimizing a town, turning its citizens into blood-drinking undead. The primary inspirations are the novel *'Salem's Lot* and its adaptations, the *Fright Night* movies, and the *Count Yorga* series. It is *not* intended to model a group of experienced vampire hunters (such as in *John Carpenter's Vampires*) or a city-wide hunt for a vampire (as in *The Night Stalker*).
- It is assumed that the townspeople in the story will be disbelieving or even hostile towards the Protagonists, because they (the townspeople) don't believe in vampires or see the Protagonists harassing, vilifying or otherwise attacking a prominent citizen (who is actually is the Vampire).
- Vampire stories usually revolve around the day / night cycle (since vampires are active and strong at night, and weak during the day), as well as specific vulnerabilities and methods to kill vampires. There are new rules provided below to model these conventions.

NEW RULES

Day/night divide. Protagonists can make only one Investigate roll during daylight hours, and must wait until the next game day to Investigate further. If the group wants to make more Investigate rolls, they will have to split up.

Vampire vulnerabilities. You may decide before or during the game which of the classic vampire vulnerabilities (sunlight, stakes, crucifixes, etc.) actually work and which are myth. You can also discover this during play. Vampire vulnerabilities are tags, and can be gained like any other tag. These tags can be gained by killing vampire spawn (see below), an *Investigate* 10+ roll (as a wild tag), an *Investigate* 7-9 roll (as a temp tag), a *Face Peril* 10+ roll (as a positive tag), an *Encounter True Horror* 7-9 roll (as a clue; take it as a wild tag), through the *Reveal Something About the World* move (as an item), the *Let the Horror Sink In* move (exchange a positive tag for a wild vampire vulnerability tag), or the *Reveal Something About Yourself* move (as a bond with another character; both now know the vulnerability). If any of these sources don't make sense to you before or during play, eliminate them. These tags can also be marked off like any other tag. Sometimes marking off a vampire vulnerability tag makes sense — the stakes and mallets are lost, the garlic eaten. If it doesn't make sense, consider the tags permanent.

Killing vampires. If you wish to have explicit rules for defeating the Vampire or vampire spawn, use the following:

To kill the Vampire, a Protagonist must be set up for success in the fiction, have at least one vampire vulnerability tag, and roll 10+ on *Face Peril*. The process for killing a vampire spawn is the same, except they can be killed on a roll of 7-9 as well. If a 7-9 is rolled, the Protagonist must mark off one of the injury results as usual, but may also gain a vampire vulnerability tag — during the fight, the character(s) discovered a new way of dispatching vampires. (Previously discovered vampire vulnerability tags can be used to fight vampire spawn as well.)

QUESTIONS

The first page of the playset is a questionnaire to be filled out pre-game, during character and town creation, and/or during play. Every question gives a number of pre-made options, as well as a blank space to write in your own answers.

What is the Vampire's name?

The options listed are for a traditional Eastern European-seeming Vampire, but you shouldn't feel constrained by that. Whatever you choose, make it memorable!

What is the Vampire's personality?

Again, the options listed are pretty typical of vampires across various media. I suggest choosing one to keep it simple to role play, but there's no reason you couldn't choose more than one — vampires tend to slide from one of these to the next based on the circumstances.

What does the Vampire look like?

The basic options listed are essentially, “looks human,” “looks human but a little off,” and “definitely a monster.” This is a pretty important choice, as it preclude certain developments — no one is going to invite the Vampire to the town's centennial party if he has blue skin, yellow eyes and rat-like incisors. (Well, one would hope.) Also important to note that if the Vampire creates spawn, do they end up looking like the Vampire? They often do, but it's not set in stone; don't be afraid to mix it up.

Did the Vampire move to the town, or were they unleashed from a hidden place?

The playset generally assumes the the Vampire has recently moved to the town. However, another option is that the Vampire was trapped in a hidden place somewhere in town, and was recently released, due to human action or a natural occurrence like an earthquake, flood, etc. The circumstances around the Vampire's captivity, and whether

or not any (presumably old) townspeople know what happened can be a source of clues to be discovered by the Protagonists.

Where does the Vampire keep their lair?

The options listed give the usual places a Vampire can keep their lair, and making that lair one of the town tags is always a great way of tying things together. However, if you're feeling adventurous, consider more outré possibilities: a condominium, a nursing home, the storage room of a department store, a bank vault.

What powers does the Vampire have?

What exactly the Vampire can do will flavor how the story plays out, in how they victimize the townspeople, and how they attack and defend themselves from the Protagonists. Does the Vampire forcibly hold their victim, or use a hypnotizing gaze to freeze them in place? Do they fight back by breaking bones with their incredible strength, or turn into a wolf and use their powerful jaws? If they need to escape, do they crawl up the walls, or turn into a mist?

What are the Vampire's vulnerabilities?

Some of the options here have two boxes — one to indicate a Vampire's weakness, and one to indicate that weakness is also deadly to the Vampire. This list will be the source of vampire vulnerability tags (see New Rules, above). One vulnerability you should think about early is whether or not a vampire needs permission to enter a building. This is, in essence, a difficulty setting; if vampires don't need permission, then no place is safe, and the Protagonists' mission will be that much more challenging. It is assumed a Vampire's vampire spawn share all vulnerabilities.

What does the Vampire want?

Pretty much every Vampire wants simply to survive, which means new victims every night or so, and perhaps that's enough for your session. However, consider the question further. Do they have a larger goal? They might be like Count Dracula, using the town as a foothold towards world domination. Or instead, they might be like

Count Dracula, and wish to reunite with their reincarnated lost love, who happens to be a local NPC. If you can think of a goal that's unique to your vampire, you're on your way to making a very memorable *Fear of the Unknown* game.

Does the Vampire have any human servitors?

Not every Vampire has a human servant, although it's a great trope to use. Furthermore, a daywalking human can serve as a threat to the Protagonists who otherwise might feel safe during the day portions of the game. Another thing to consider: does the human servitor have any special powers? If so, what are they, and how did they get them? (Usually, the powers are similar to the Vampire's, and they're usually granted via drinking the Vampire's blood, but feel free to create your own answers.)

Does the Vampire create vampire spawn? If so, does the Vampire control them or leave them to their own devices?

The playset generally assumes that the Vampire is creating spawn, but while this is a standard trope, it isn't a necessary one, and you can ignore it if you like. However, there are two potential benefits to including it. First, vampire spawn are a source of danger and conflict, which is what we want in *Fear of the Unknown*, and if you use the new rules above, they are also a source of vampire vulnerabilities, which will aid the Protagonists in taking down the Vampire. Second, vampire spawn are a great source of Encounter True Horror moves, as the Protagonists see townspeople changed into horrible undead creatures. Towards that, if the Protagonists encounter a vampire spawn early on in the game, give the players a quick background on who this vampire once was, and why they might care. ("You can tell this pale animated corpse with blood dripping from his fangs was once kindly Farmer John, who lived with his family out on Route 12.")

Then, also consider if the Vampire is controlling their spawn to further their agenda, or if they have abandoned them, leaving them to fend for themselves. (The second possibility doesn't show up

often, but it does happen in *Blacula*; Mamuwalde turns several people, including a cop, into vampires but never calls on them in any way.) This is also a difficulty setting: a swarm of vampire spawn following the Vampire's orders is much more dangerous than an unorganized group of individual vampire spawn, each doing their own thing.

Can vampirization be reversed?

Last but certainly not least, can a vampire be turned back into a human? This question can be phrased differently: how dark do you want your game to be? If a beloved NPC gets turned into a vampire and that's permanent, either that's a great bit of drama or a huge bummer, depending on your players.

INVESTIGATE AND FACE PERIL TABLES

The second and third pages of the playset are the 6- Investigate and 6- Face Peril tables from the core rulebook, only slightly rewritten. The results have also been reorganized so that the least-worst consequences are at the top, and the very worst at the end. Each result also gives three examples of how that consequence might reveal itself in play.

THE STRUCTURE SHEET

The fourth page of the playset is The Structure Sheet. This page is divided into two parts. The first part is the Inciting Incident from the core rulebook, only with the results reassigned to different numbers. The lower the number, the further away the Protagonists start from the Antagonist, which will require more Investigate moves; the higher the number, the likelihood the Protagonists will have to soon Face Peril increases. Each Inciting Incident also has three example starting situations in which to begin play.

The second part are the three questions that should be answered before the Protagonists can attempt to defeat the Vampire for good. These questions are: *Who is the Vampire?*, *Where is the Vampire's lair?*, and *How can the Vampire be destroyed?* This section is optional in play.

Who is the Vampire?

This is probably the easiest question for the Protagonists to answer; it may happen in the first scene. But it still could prove difficult. If the Vampire has been released from some kind of confinement, then it's unlikely the Protagonists will initially know who the Vampire is or what they look like. Another possible tack is that the most obvious suspect may not be correct. Perhaps they *look* like the Vampire, but in reality it's a different character. Or maybe they are *a* vampire, but the actual Master Vampire is someone different. Regardless, once the Vampire has been identified, be sure the players understand they are one step closer to the conclusion.

Where is the Vampire's lair?

If the Vampire is a prominent citizen, then this question is also probably easily answered — their lair is their home. But Vampires are wily, and they may find a less obvious place to rest. An 6- Investigate roll could even throw a wrench into this question ("*Discover a clue but something else goes wrong*" could mean the Protagonists discover an old lair that isn't in use anymore, and must keep looking to find the current one.) If the Vampire was released from confinement, however, then Investigate moves will be required to dig up the

history of the Vampire, where they were imprisoned, and where they might be now. Once the lair has been located, the players should understand they are nearly ready for the final confrontation. Bonus question: what happens to the Vampire if their lair is destroyed?

How can the Vampire be destroyed?

No sense in confronting the Vampire if you don't know how to defeat them. If you use the rules above, then every time a vampire spawn is destroyed, the Protagonists gain access to a vampire vulnerability tag. But if your Vampire isn't creating spawn, then the Protagonists will have to use the tag creation options in Investigate, Face Peril, Encounter True Horror, Reveal Something About the World, Let the Horror Sink In, and / or Reveal Something About Yourself to create vampire weakness tags. Make it clear to the players that once they have a vampire vulnerability, they know how to kill the Vampire, and are one step closer to resolving the scenario. All they have to do is get the Vampire into a position where they can destroy them. Not hard, right? Right?

VIDEOGRAPHY

Count Yorga, Vampire (1970) Three couples visit the home of recent émigré Count Yorga for a seance, which turns out to be a bad idea. Robert Quarry's Yorga is one of my favorite screen vampires, just a completely arrogant S.O.B. but with the abilities to justify it. This is a bit pokey for the most of the running time, but gets real tense real quick in the last fifteen minutes — if you're going to invade a Vampire's lair, *have a plan*. Director Bob Kelljan is responsible for three of the movies listed here, making him, in my eyes, the godfather of the modern movie vampire.

The Return of Count Yorga (1971) Quarry and Kelljan return for the sequel, which I think is leaps and bounds better than the first. Pretty similar plot, but this time Yorga has designs specifically on winsome Mariette Hartley. Kelljan gives his vampire spawn a shambling, *Night of the Living Dead*-zombie quality, which shouldn't work, but does. Ends not with a terrifying freeze-frame, but *two* terrifying freeze-frames.

The Deathmaster (1972) A *Count Yorga* film in all but name, this features Quarry as Khorda, a vampire who turns a group of seaside hippies into the living dead cult — Manson was on a lot of peoples' minds in '72, as you can imagine. Not directed by Kelljan, and it shows.

Blacula (1972) William Marshall gives a terrific performance as Prince Mamuwalde, cursed by a racist Count Dracula to exist forever as an undead bloodsucker, who is accidentally brought to modern-day Los Angeles. This one is closer to a "city-wide hunt" structure, but also features a lot of inadvertent vampire spawn as well as the "reincarnated lost love" trope. The way *Blacula's* main conflict is solved (Mamuwalde walks into the sunlight when his reincarnated lost love is killed) probably wouldn't translate well to a table session, but it's one to keep in your back pocket anyway.

Scream Blacula Scream (1973) Bob Kelljan was tapped for this sequel, which essentially places Marshall's Mamuwalde in a more *Yorga*-like scenario. Here, he's resurrected by a Voodoo priest for revenge, which turns out to be a bad idea. This is one of the few modern vampire movies to give its Vampire a goal other than just spreading evil — in this case, Mamuwalde is trying to cure his vampirism with the help of a Voodoo priestess. Giving the Vampire a sympathetic goal probably wouldn't work for a lot of sessions, but again, something to keep in your back pocket, because who knows where the story will go? Lastly, were you freaked out when, on the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tv series, a vampire would turn from human-looking to undead-feral in the space of a cut? Kelljan seems to have invented that here.

Salem's Lot (1979) A writer returns to his hometown just as a vampire moves into the big scary house on the hill. A classic of the genre, even if the great scares are sandwiched in between some very '70s TV melodrama. In the book, the small town drama works because we are able to subjectively get

into the skins of the various townsfolk. That's much more difficult in a film, even at three hours long, as the "objective" camera flattens the conflicts, turning them into clichés. Whatever misgivings I have about it as a film, though, it still contains four of the greatest vampire movie scenes ever made (the grave, Mark's bedroom, the hospital, Mark's dining room).

Fright Night (1985) A forgotten(?) classic, about a high school kid who plays peeping tom on the mysterious new stranger next door, which turns out to be a bad idea. This one is a good template for a *Fear of the Unknown* session, as it feels very "miniature" — there's only like eight characters and a handful of locations. Also features the rare "it's possible to turn a vampire back into a human" trope, this one tied to destroying the Vampire before dawn. If you allow a vampire to be turned back into a human, don't forget a ticking clock. ***Salem's Lot*** (2004) Tries very hard to correct for the 1979's missteps — this one certainly feels more like it's about a town than any one character — but the overwrought writing and early-aughts televisual style sinks it. Despite having the legendary Rutger Hauer as Barlow, this ends up demonstrating through negative example why making Barlow a mute, horrifying nosferatu was a good idea.

Fright Night (2011) Perfectly decent updated remake, with one fantastic scene of a Vampire getting around the "can't go inside the house without being invited in" rule. If your players haven't seen this, steal this moment!

Salem's Lot (2024) This is, I think, the best film adaptation of the book, because, counterintuitively, it doesn't really try to adapt the book. The screenwriters understood that a faithful adaptation would take 8-10 hours, and, having only two, surgically slice the narrative to the bone. Moves quick, has some scares, has a decent variation on the hospital scene, has a pretty good new climax involving a drive-in theater. Still, if you're a purist, you'll likely hate this.