

- Find an online map of the in-game area (Google Maps is useful), or upload a PDF of the location to your telephone. Mark locations that are important, from local Elysiums to the Rack, as well as any feeding territories claimed by local clans or important city individuals so that you have the information readily available.
- Obsidian Portal is a wonderful wiki site where Storytellers can coordinate character backgrounds, in-game locations, vampiric lineages, and important events, keeping that information accessible to your players.
- There are several RPS generators available for use on cellphones. Keeping one available can help ensure randomness in Storyteller challenge throws or defuse any accusations of bias.
- A PDF copy of BNS's **Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** book is a handy thing to keep on your phone or an electronic tablet. Being able to double-check a rule or look up details on a power can save a lot of headache during combat or other tense scenes.

Computer Programs

The more organized you are, the less panicked you will be when you have to run things. It's a good idea to use computer programs to keep character and chronicle information updated and accessible, especially between games.

- Word, Excel, Outlook, and Office are obviously useful programs; most computers come equipped with some version of these items.
- Scrivener and Evernote are intended for writers organizing novel chapters or research theses, but they are also great for organizing your chronicle and structuring ongoing plots. Scrivener allows you to link images to specific write-ups. Scrivener also has a random name generator, which can be very useful.

The Mental Toolbox

Storytelling a LARP involves more than compiling physical props and keeping up with administrative recordkeeping. To be successful, the Storyteller must develop a realistic world, create detailed plots, establish realistic NPCs, and be prepared to roll with unexpected player actions. She keeps plots visible and mutable, and encourages players to interact with each other rather than constantly seeking narrative attention. These things are integral to the Storyteller's mental toolbox.

Analyze the Sheet

A character sheet is more than a measure of relative power-level within the world. It helps define the concept, and purchased

items indicate a player's interest in the character's historical elements. A character's history should explain high attributes (or low ones), describe the methods by which the character learned skills and developed backgrounds prior to the start of play, and explain merits and flaws.

Each item on a character sheet is a visible manifestation of the player's investment in the game. When a player chooses to purchase a high Influence level, or puts points in a Retainer, she is telling the Storyteller that these items motivate the character. By affecting the character's Influences or initiating roleplay with their Retainers, the Storyteller can leverage that buy-in to get the player quickly and emotionally invested in a plot. If a lot of characters in your game possess a certain merit, flaw, influence, or other common investment, you can create a plot that hits on the specific theme, and character interest will develop quickly and naturally.

However, a Storyteller must use this investment gently. Constantly kidnapping a character's Retainers, making her Influences useless, or causing players to feel that a particular merit is constantly detrimental to roleplay will cause the Storyteller to lose player trust.

Let Your World Do the Work

Contrary to popular belief, the most important part of telling a story isn't running a plot; it's creating a world. Building a setting and populating that world with believable, motivated NPCs can have strong emotional effects and generate more intense roleplay than any manufactured plotline.

A Storyteller should look at most NPCs as opportunities to educate players about the setting. A setting should be understandable, predictable, and believable. How an NPC acts provides solid clues about "normal" behavior within the world. If NPCs are presented as well-rounded individuals with morals, flaws, and goals, there is a better chance that players will act rationally toward them, and therefore behave properly within the world. If NPCs are presented as throwaway cardboard cut-outs, players will treat the setting with very little respect. Interacting with NPCs helps players become emotionally invested. Without that investment, player characters will not act realistically or behave with a natural self-preservation instinct.

Unless they have realistic interactions with the world, players can forget there is a setting outside the player-character-on-player-character rivalries within a LARP. This is a tremendous loss; the Masquerade is a critical part of Vampire, and the gothic-punk world that surrounds the game is integral to its theme. Interactions with NPCs show characters that there are world-based consequences, and that roleplay matters even when no other players are involved. This sense of pressure, the feeling that the world is watching, adds an important dimension

to the game. The **World of Darkness** is neither forgiving nor benevolent. If players think they can act without concern for the setting's norms, or that dangerous consequences can be ignored if they don't originate from other players, they will not feel an emotional response. Stories in the game will not have impact.

Pacing

Remember that drama comes from evolution and change. Properly done, a dramatic moment will change the characters involved and might even change the world in which they exist. To create emotional risk, the situation must directly threaten the goals, loyalties, or morality of characters participating. In the most climactic cases, the situation may threaten the characters' unives. To be truly meaningful, these situations should involve choices that significantly alter the flow of a story. The best choices force a character to choose between equally beneficial things or equally hurtful things, offering both benefit and punishment regardless of the final decision. Save your lover, or rescue your best friend? Destroy the bomb that endangers the hospital, or find a way to prevent the villain from escaping? Characters must have limitations, and those limitations cause turning points that force difficult and even desperate choices—and therefore, dramatic moments within the story.

It is critical that a Storyteller pose interesting and engaging opportunities, seeking to make the decision as difficult as possible, but the final choice must belong to the player. The Storyteller sets the pace of the game, pushes characters into conflict and crisis, and describes the consequence of player actions, but she can't – and shouldn't – plan out the end of plots. Players must have the freedom to choose whatever resolution they find best. Otherwise, your players will be frustrated, sensing that their actions and choices have no meaning. Don't be afraid of your players; the plot resolution is a time for you to be the audience and listen to the story that your players want to tell.

Remember that no plot survives contact with the players. They will think of things you didn't consider, call on NPCs you had forgotten, and focus on aspects of your chronicle that you'd barely defined. Sometimes this means the end of a plot will take a sharp left-hand turn. That's alright. Simply think about their choices in the context of your chronicle's setting, and tell them what happens. Don't panic, and don't consider this a slight against your carefully arranged plans.

Be flexible. Be prepared. Enjoy the ride.

LARP is a Multiplayer Game

A LARP plot provides reasons for players to interact, whether through teamwork or in competition with one another. If a

plot causes players to interact with the Storyteller more than with each other, then it is not a good LARP scenario. LARP plots should be open and accommodating, able to incorporate a large number of players (or develop with only a few). Unlike a novel, there is no “protagonist,” nor should one character receive the lion's share of attention. Storytellers must take into account the game's multiplayer format, integrating characters with variable levels of power and providing different catalysts for involvement. Plots should cause characters to seek each other out and discover strengths (and weaknesses), engaging the players in constant roleplay.

Good plots should continually push players back to the main populace of the game. Use common threats or isolating situations to forge unusual alliances within your player group. Give players reasons to roleplay with individuals they don't know well out of character. Keep an eye out for political blocs and in-character factions as they develop, and don't allow one group of players to control in-character power in the game. In the same vein, it's a bad idea for a single clan (or lineage) to overpopulate the game, or for the most charismatic or experienced players to form an impenetrable alliance. Such things throw a chronicle out of balance and cause players to lose interest.

Struggling toward such a bloc is a wonderful in-character goal, but it is not beneficial for a single group of players to dominate a game. A player should strive toward her character's goals, but a Storyteller should realize that achieving those goals could be disruptive. Storytellers should actively create obstacles, cause in-game conflict and mistrust, and build divisions or break down alliances within the game. Creating this sort of interactive environment is critical; properly motivated players with conflicting goals will entertain one another (and most importantly, will do so without constant attention from the Storyteller).

The Social Toolbox

Now that you have props and physical tools assembled, and you've spent time readying plot and building a living, flexible environment, you're ready to create the third toolbox: social mechanisms. Live-action roleplaying is an intensely social environment, and **Vampire: The Masquerade** is a game with emphasis on political structures and interpersonal maneuvering. As Storyteller, you need to facilitate your players' political machinations and power-grabs. At the same time, you need to keep your friends entertained, cooperative, and eager to play again. That's a tall order!

Earn Trust

There is a critical adage of LARPing: **If there is no trust, there is no game.**

The most important thing a Storyteller must do is earn (and keep) the trust of her players. If a Storyteller is trusted, she can make rules errors, run a tedious plot, or drop the ball on downtime actions—yet her players will still work with her to develop fun games. If a Storyteller isn't trusted, she can do everything else perfectly, but her players will question and argue every step of the way. The game won't be fun for anyone.

Remember that players see only small pieces of a large and interconnected game. They don't know one another's actions, motives, or choices. **Vampire: The Masquerade** thrives on political scenarios with labyrinthine motives and hidden knives. It is integral that a Storyteller remain trustworthy. Her players must feel assured that all interpersonal character conflicts are occurring within the scope of the rules. If the Storyteller isn't trusted, interpersonal character conflicts will quickly become out-of-character arguments.

Storytellers walk a fine line between creating intense scenes and respecting personal boundaries. Players want a sense of emotional risk, but to create this, the Storyteller must be worthy of emotional trust. Don't kill characters arbitrarily. Warn players when deadly situations are approaching, and remind them that the **World of Darkness** does not balance threat to character ability. Listen to player concerns, and be open with anything that troubles you. As Storyteller, you must constantly strive to be above doubt. This means providing as much transparency as possible, and having frank and open discussions with your players.

A Storyteller must also admit when she is wrong, and seek to correct those errors whenever possible. She must be willing to revise rules calls when they don't work for the troupe. It is also important to have a good sense of humor, to give others the benefit of the doubt, and to always encourage players to bring their A-game. A Storyteller's attitude is essential to her ability to build and keep trust.

The Visible Plot

Vampire: The Masquerade is a subtle game and encourages sneaky political maneuvering from players. However, as Storyteller, you must ensure that plots come to the attention of every player. It is a game that relies on drama, conflict, and showmanship, and vampires thrive on public displays of power. Plot information and major events should be shared, and significant actions should occur at the center of the game, in front of the majority of players, rather than hidden in a side room. Such situations should provide wide scale opportunity to react, respond, and promote roleplay. Yes, vampires are paranoid and secretive, but they are also creatures of high drama and courtly (i.e. public) intrigue.

When players say they'd prefer to hide their backstabbing, political coups, or other activities, they are really saying

they don't want to risk losing in these gambits. While that's understandable in a game you are playing to win, **Vampire: The Masquerade** has no "winning" or "losing." It should be played for melodrama and significant emotional moments. Encourage players to be ostentatious, perform their social attacks, relish their victories, and rue their losses as publically as possible. If necessary to facilitate public spectacle, ask other players to hold their actions until the moment of drama is complete. Find a compromise between player agency and public showmanship. Remember, the game belongs to everyone.

To help keep every player involved in the chronicle, a Storyteller should take pains to show plot events openly. Avoid encouraging small groups to run off and solve issues alone, and encourage players to use critical information rather than keeping it hidden. It is one thing for vampires to want the most advantage out of their sneaky, underhanded activities, but entirely another to have a game stall out or feel boring because players won't share or include others.

The First Fifteen Minutes

Once players have developed characters and costuming, and the Storyteller has readied NPCs and world events, it is time for everyone to gather and play the game. LARPer are notorious slackers, prone to arrive late and spend the first chunk of time at a game chatting rather than roleplaying. Unfortunately, this can set the tone for the rest of the evening, and cause events to feel uncomfortably rushed or passionless. Players will slip into and out of character, trying to decide if everyone else is "in-game" or not. They will stand around chatting, waiting for answers to downtime actions or trying to organize the coterie with whom they want to enter, and before you know it, half the night's passed by without anything significant occurring. Once this has happened a few times, it starts to become a standard pattern of the game.

An entire evening can turn on the first 15 minutes. Kicking the game off swiftly and keeping people in character are critical skills to master, and they can mean the difference between a great game and two hours of rushed-feeling or lackluster roleplay. The Storyteller should take steps to start the evening right, and pay special attention to encouraging those crucial first few minutes of the game.

- Before the game, deal with downtime actions or preliminary feeding issues. If you need to do so, arrange for an assistant to handle minor check-in details while you get the game started. Remember—if you aren't on time, the players can't be held to that standard, either.
- Specifically take time to talk to any players who tend to be late, and give them in- or out-of-character reasons to be on time.

- Call the players together just before the game starts, and speak with them as a group. Read a description of the setting, or take a moment to talk about the themes and emotions you hope to incorporate into the night's game. Be enthusiastic and smile, but keep distractions and joking around to a minimum, as they are disruptive to the emotional setting you're trying to create. The more you allow players' attention to waver, the harder it will be to set the scene and help players get into character.
- Take a moment in your before-game announcements to note any new players and thank them for coming to the game. Ensure that more experienced players go out of their way to make sure new people feel welcomed and encouraged to get immediately involved.
- Counting down from three may seem like child's play, but it is an excellent tool to alert players that roleplay is about to start. Counting down from three gives players a moment to stop kibitzing, slide back into character, and fall into roleplay. Calling out "Okay, game on!" doesn't give players this preparatory breath of time, and the countdown makes beginning roleplay feel like a more unified endeavor. It's a bit of a psychological trick, but it works.

If your game has already fallen into the habit of slow-starting, there are some unusual methods you can try in order to break those bad habits. Think of ways to shake your players up, and give them reasons to believe the first half-hour of game will have interesting events, unique roleplay opportunities, or critical plot moments.

- When you are ready to begin, have the players arrange themselves around the gaming space as they might if they were in character, creating a frozen tableau. Tell them to close their eyes for a moment and mentally get into character without moving from their pose. Use this moment to dim or change the lighting, start background music, or otherwise change the game environment in some small way, as a sign that the in-character portion of the night is about to begin. Then, count down from three and tell them to start gameplay as they are.
- Depending on the night's premise, you can start the game in media res of a dangerous or critical circumstance. Open the game's metaphorical curtains onto a dangerous battlefield, a difficult parlay with contrary NPCs, a grand procession, or formal announcement by prominent NPCs (or PCs), or some other visible plot activity. Players can immediately invest themselves in the political, social, or combat-related action, address the issues involved, and have something to talk about and build on during the rest of the game. This sort of game opener works well at the very beginning of a chronicle, when players aren't as

familiar with their characters or your setting and require an additional push into roleplay.

Teach Through Rewards

Roleplaying is a hobby, and like any activity, people will continue to come so long as they are enjoying their time in the game. That's why it's important to provide each player with a great moment in each session—not a moment of victory or an easy benefit, but a fun roleplay moment: something the player can think about and enjoy for days to come. Regardless of whether a player is new or a veteran, young or old, a spotlight is always thrilling and immensely satisfying.

Learn to recognize a player's interests, and guide that player into turning those interests and character specializations into part of the night's game. Even if it is a small thing, like a fun combat scene, an interesting way to approach the plot, or a clever idea, everyone wants to feel included and celebrated. A little bit of encouragement or a few minutes of personal attention can make the difference between a player having a great time or feeling bored and lackluster. Bored players eventually stop coming to the game.

If a player puts extra effort into a performance, plan, or action, or if their character accepts a particularly painful consequence or makes a concrete sacrifice, the Storyteller should do everything she can to reward that moment with roleplay. These moments are investments in your game, and you should always take the time to make such things important, even if they weren't initially included in plot planning. The more a Storyteller goes out of her way to reward and encourage cleverness, creativity, or emotional roleplay, the more often these things will occur. Divulge an extra clue, reveal part of your plot that you'd planned to keep secret for a while, or give the player and her allies a minor advantage that relates directly to the player's actions.

As a Storyteller, think about the lessons you are teaching your players. If you always punish a player when she is creative, she will stop using her imagination at your game. If you ignore a character's emotional moments or sacrifices, your players will stop trying to have such moments. If every interaction with NPCs becomes a combat scenario, the players will learn to treat NPCs like a set of statistics and nothing more. Take the time to reward positive contributions to the game, so that your players will look for such opportunities and actively pursue them.

Encourage your players to provide positive examples of roleplay and interaction. Players should be glad they came to the game and feel as if they received fun and entertainment in exchange for their investment of time. That's one important way to get the players to be active, interested, and return for the next session of the chronicle.

Recaps

After a combat, the Storyteller should quickly summarize what happened, providing a brief synopsis of the scene to everyone who witnessed the events in character. The VTM system is designed to make combat swift and intuitive, but players don't usually pay attention to a combat if they aren't actively throwing tests. A quick recap ensures that the players are on the same page about the scene that has played out before them.

After the game, call your players together and give a brief recap of the night's events. Don't provide "spoilers" of hidden information, but do be certain that everyone at the game understands the meaning of any plot events or public scenes and what those developments might mean for the chronicle. Encourage your players to share short descriptions of intense or meaningful scenes that were less obvious, and take time to thank new players for trying out your game.

Conclusion

A good Storyteller is an organized Storyteller, prepared to handle many difficult situations and to coordinate a large number of players in a flexible and decisive manner. The more work you put in ahead of time, the more fun you (and your players) will have at the game. Although every troupe (and every Storyteller) is different, the right set of tools can be integral to ensuring a successful chronicle and a happy, enthusiastic player base.

The last tool in the Storyteller Toolbox is for the Storyteller to use on herself: Know when you're not having fun. Measure your reactions from time to time, and be honest. If you aren't having a good time as Storyteller anymore, your ennui will influence the whole game, eating away at player enthusiasm, too. Don't force yourself to be Storyteller if you are burned out, no matter how much you want to live up to that responsibility. Instead, pass these tools to your successor and take a well-earned vacation as a player. The game will be better for having a fresh, enthusiastic viewpoint on the world, and you'll have earned a period of rest.

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Ree Soesbee, Associate Developer for By Night Studios, is an award-winning writer, game designer, and author of more than 16 novels in a wide variety of fantastic worlds, including the ever-popular Dragonlance saga. Ree has been nominated for multiple Origins Awards. She is currently a Narrative Designer for ArenaNet on the internationally-acclaimed MMORPG *Guild Wars 2*. In addition to her work on *Mind's Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade*, she was a contributing author to *Clanbook: Lasombra*, *Clanbook: Tremere*, *House Tremere (Dark Ages)*, and the *MET Sabbat Guide*. Ree holds a Masters' degree in Myth and Literature, performed her doctorate studies at UNC-Chapel Hill, and hopes one day to diablerize Mithras, Prince of London, after a series of insanely one-sided monomacy challenges.



Roleplaying by the Numbers

By Kevin Millard

Roleplaying and rules are often thought of as diametrically opposed forces. Some players hate it when their roleplay is interrupted for the purpose of throwing tests or using mechanical effects. Others feel that the mathematical and tactical challenge of rules is more exciting (and more “fair”) than relying on dramatics. A great LARP must strike a balance between the two.

The best game systems are those in which rules support and reinforce roleplaying and the story of the setting. This theory can be seen in the mechanical composition of the **Mind’s Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade** (MET:VTM) system. Rules should support roleplay; roleplay should build from (not be hampered by) the rules.

This essay covers how we designed the rules and the story to work together to produce the best possible game system and personal roleplaying opportunities.

Why Rules Are Important to Story

So, why are rules important? If a chronicle is run by a good Storyteller, the game will be fun even if the system is terrible. On its surface, this is a fine argument, but in truth, a poorly created rules set causes a number of subtle problems. These issues wear down even the best Storytellers, deeply affect player trust, and can eventually ruin a chronicle.

- **Storyteller Workload:** Every time the rules fail, a Storyteller must solve the initial problem, create a rules-fix, maintain any precedents created, and keep careful track of adjudications and systems additions. This burden becomes exponentially difficult in a large or long-running chronicle. If a Storyteller is constantly dealing with such issues, it is difficult to allocate time to devising plots, encouraging character development, or running stories.
- **Limited Game Size:** A poorly written or badly balanced system requires a large number of Storytellers per capita. These volunteers are needed to judge ongoing issues or educate new players about “house rules.” This situation requires more and more players to volunteer their time shepherding the rules rather than playing the game.
- **Player Trust:** Even if a Storyteller works diligently to maintain rules balance, it is inevitable that difficulties, arguments, and simple errors will occur. With an unbalanced core system, Storytellers must constantly put

a strain on player trust, hoping that each new change or addition to the rules will be seen as impartial and fair. Even if the Storyteller has the best motives, constant mechanical alterations will cause accusations of bias or cronyism, driving players away from the game.

A good Storyteller can build a fun game on an unstable foundation, but imagine how amazing that chronicle could be if that Storyteller built the chronicle on a solid and balanced set of rules! A strong mechanical base allows a Storyteller to keep her focus on stories, rather than bureaucratic minutia, accusations of mistrust, or constant rules arguments.

Balancing the Rules with Story

Although no rules system is perfect, the MET:VTM mechanics are designed to be as reliable and balanced as possible. It was playtested in massively populous, interconnected chronicles and also by smaller, independent troupe games. Design choices were made to facilitate Storytelling and to make the game easy to learn and easy to run. To understand the game’s mechanical design, it’s important to explain a few of the design pillars inherent to the system.

- **Merits vs. Experience:** A character’s power level in MET:VTM is represented by experience points, used to purchase powers, abilities, and other advantages that give the character an “edge.” In this manner, characters that have survived many games have more experience points and are more powerful than newly created characters. Merits, on the other hand, are universally limited to seven points, no matter how new or how senior the character in question. This double-pronged system of advancement rewards older characters by assuring them a breadth of purchased items, while allowing new characters the opportunity to be useful and distinct from their first night in game by purchasing an unusual merit. A recently made character must not feel entirely outgunned, otherwise new players (and experienced players replacing initial characters) will have no incentive to join a game in media res. Both systems, and their limitations, are necessary.
- **Only Important Tests:** With very few exceptions, tests to activate powers or rituals are only necessary if the mechanic targets another character. If a player spends hard-earned experience to purchase a power or ritual, she should be able to rely on that item’s basic functionality. Performing tests every time a character wants to use

a power on herself is needlessly time consuming, and wasting resources (Blood or otherwise) on an item that randomly fails to activate simply isn't fun.

- *Don't Waste the Storyteller's Time:* The MET: VTM rules are designed to be self-sufficient and not require the constant attention of a Storyteller. Storytellers have a lot to do at game and cannot constantly pay attention to every power activation or ability use. A Storyteller can roleplay a character's Nightmare flaw if it is a plot point or creates an important character moment, but merits, flaws, and powers should be impactful even if the Storyteller doesn't have time to throw pre-game challenges with everyone.
- *Rules Enforce Theme:* Brujah are described in story as being very loyal to one another; therefore, their clan's 1-point merit offers an advantage when they fight as a group. Nosferatu are described as information-gatherers and spies; therefore, Nosferatu merits and powers help them perform such functions in game. Offering advantages to characters that reinforce story-based themes will encourage players to portray those archetypes, while still allowing non-stereotypical characters to exist (though they may be less efficient) for the purposes of roleplay.

Every Game is Different

Whether handling an independent troupe game or a massive international chronicle, every Storyteller runs things a little differently, and every game has unique requirements. The MET: VTM system provides a mechanical base, but it is also designed to allow Storyteller customization to meet the needs of her specific chronicle. You can see this flexibility in the various settings described in the core book (Anarch, Camarilla, and Sabbat), which add custom items and limited systems additions or changes. Through creating a setting document, Storytellers can tailor the base systems of MET: VTM to the needs of their chronicles.

The settings in the base book flesh out the traditional **Vampire: The Masquerade** environments and provide templates for Storytellers who want to integrate custom systems appropriate to a chronicle's theme and storyline. Still, before adding new mechanics or changing inherent systems, a Storyteller should carefully consider the possible pitfalls.

- *Game Balance:* Each time a Storyteller adds, subtracts, or changes the rules, she alters the fundamental game balance and impacts the play environment. If diablerie becomes easier or more rewarding, more players will choose to diablerize. Therefore, the game's player-versus-player conflicts will potentially increase, as players seek to exploit those new rules. Like water

rolling downhill, players will typically follow the course of least resistance (or greatest efficiency). Be sure to plan for the storyline and roleplay consequences of any mechanical change.

- *Barrier to Entry:* Most new players learn a new system by reading the published books. When they arrive at a game, they expect the rules to be familiar. It is difficult for players to remember custom rules, particularly when they must memorize an entire compendium of changes or additions. With each alteration, the Storyteller makes it more difficult for new players to join her chronicle. If changes are truly necessary for your story, make sure that each one is well thought out and easy to understand, and be sure new players are made aware of these changes (and are given a printed copy).
- *Perception and Trust:* Player perception can be as important as game balance. By allowing some players access to an item, but disallowing others from buying it, a Storyteller can be perceived as having a bias even if her motives are pure. It is better to raise costs, but keep the item available for purchase by all players, if you wish to limit an item's rarity in your game.

Custom Rules

Custom rules can be powerful tools to make a chronicle feel distinct, but used unwisely, such items can raise the barrier to entry and create serious game imbalances. Before you create custom systems, make sure they are necessary and impactful. If possible, Storytellers should rename or add distinct story changes to existing systems and items, rather than creating something entirely new. Perhaps the Black Hand in your game is an order of Seraphim; perhaps all vampires take aggravated damage from gold. Such changes have minimal impact on the rules, but can provide a distinctly unique feel to a chronicle.

Mechanics that are restricted to a particular group (such as clan or setting-specific merits) are intended to define the stereotypes of that group. Allowing characters outside that group to possess such items will cause significant imbalances, especially if only a few characters (Sabbat refugees, perhaps) are allowed to purchase those mechanics. No matter how compelling a character's background or history, this kind of unequal access will imbalance the game and create a strong perception of Storyteller favoritism.

That said, we can offer a few suggestions for Storytellers who find customization necessary. Once you understand the pillars of rules design, you'll be much more confident tweaking things for your chronicle's needs!

Attributes

The MET:VTM system of attribute dots allows characters to begin with an equal foundation. As the character spends experience (initial or earned), the system offers the player concrete choices that will specialize the character, making it better at certain tests or in distinct situations. Bonus attribute dots are granted with the purchase of Generation, providing a tangible benefit to that background, which are carefully balanced against the experience cost of techniques, skills, and elder powers (among other things). This system touches every opposed test between two characters, determining victory and offering advantage if one character has a significantly higher attribute.

Current System Design

- *Choice:* By allowing players to decide where to place bonus attributes, the system allows for a Neonate to potentially defeat an Elder in an attribute comparison—depending on the relative allocations. Players can choose for their characters to be utterly focused in a single attribute, or to create a well-rounded attribute set.
- *Alliances:* MET: VTM utilizes a thematic rock-paper-scissors randomizer for more than just throwing and resolving challenges. Different character types (and different powers) work better against some targets and less well against others, giving items both strengths and weaknesses. Attributes figure into this balance strongly. Because a single character cannot have a completely

maximized attribute in all three categories, alliances are necessary in order to “cover all the bases.” Creating (and betraying) alliances is a critical part of a MET:VTM game; no character should be able to stand alone or the game loses a critical aspect of interpersonal connection and reliance.

Simple Customizations

- *Additional Attribute Bonuses:* A Storyteller could provide a different number of bonus dots per Generation. For example, a Storyteller might give two bonus attributes instead of one. This change would create a play environment where Elders are significantly more powerful than Neonates. Before you make this change, plan for a larger percentage of your player base to gravitate towards the Elder generation in order to capitalize on this mechanical advantage.
- *Removing Attribute Bonuses:* Another potential setting option is to remove all attribute bonuses, so that all vampires (regardless of Generation) have a maximum of 10 in each attribute category. In this scenario, merits like Skill Aptitude become much more powerful, and players will be more inclined to portray Neonates or Ancilla.

Merits and Flaws

The merit system may be *Mind’s Eye Theatre: Vampire The Masquerade*’s most important cornerstone. Altering the cost of merits and flaws (or creating new ones) can provide a great



deal of customization, defining a setting's unique distinctions. However, because the merit system is so integral to the balance of the rules, altering the system itself or raising the merit cap can cause significant problems. Merits are carefully balanced in cost, ensuring that no character can possess two 4-point items. Further, the merit cap of seven points is built into the system to ensure that characters must make choices and that no single individual can possess all of a clan's stereotypical advantages (thus letting everyone be distinct and useful). Lastly, maintaining a strict merit cap helps new players feel that they can contribute in a unique manner from their very first game, providing small advantages not possessed by even the most long-played characters in the chronicle.

Caveat nuntius.

Current System Design

- **Balance:** Merits are specifically designed to be more powerful than an ability or discipline with a similar point-cost. A 4-point merit may provide an advantage equal to the expenditure of 20-30 experience. Raising the merit cap allows players to buy even more of the most efficient mechanics in game, and that can significantly skew game balance.
- **Clan Archetype:** Clan and setting-specific merits outline that clan's major story themes and stereotypes. Ventrue merits encourage those characters to interact with the mortal world of influences and retainers, and so forth. These merits support the stereotypical image of that clan.
- **Sense of Fair Play:** Portraying a member of a rare clan or unusual bloodline is innately powerful. Such a character has access to unique disciplines and merits, and even if those abilities are not overpowering in themselves, their rarity will create tactical advantages. Rarity merits ensure that other players know that anyone could play the same character type, provided they were willing to spend their limited merit points in the same way.

Simple Customizations

- **Unilateral:** Providing all characters a single flavorful merit for free (all vampires in this chronicle have one Acute Sense), or requiring that all characters take certain flaws (all vampires in this chronicle have catlike eyes, and must take the Eerie Presence), can be a very good tool to alter the feel of a chronicle. By utilizing the merit system in this way, a Storyteller can promote unusual aspects of her setting without unbalancing the game's mechanics.
- **Sub-Organizations:** Some merits define subgroups like the Black Hand, Josian Archons, or legendary Anarch heroes.

These sub-organization merits provide special background items with minimal mechanics. Merits can indicate that a character participated in a decisive battle, manipulated or mentored a famous kine, or performed some unique duty for her sect. Because players must choose to spend their limited merit points on these background highlights, story items such as these can be fairly rare (and very prestigious).

- **Flavor:** A Storyteller could use the preexisting cost and mechanics for a merit, rewriting only the flavor of that item to make it feel more appropriate for her chronicle. This can allow a significant amount of customization without impacting game balance.
- **Custom Mechanical Merits:** If the Storyteller wishes to create merits unique to her chronicle, these new merits must be made available to all players at character creation, or there will be the perception of bias. The best way to point-cost a merit is to overestimate; if players look at the merit and say dubiously, "I'm not sure if that merit is really worth X points," then you've correctly estimated the cost. Players should feel as if they're making a difficult choice, and it's better to adjust a merit's cost downwards rather than upwards if you later feel you have incorrectly evaluated the item's capacity.

Skills and Backgrounds

Skills and backgrounds provide a great deal of flavor, helping players flesh out character histories as well as prodigal talents a character possesses. Fields of study further reveal a character's interests and occupations. Backgrounds detail a great many aspects of a character's interaction with the mortal world, and these items can help a Storyteller can flesh out the environment of her game.

Current System Design

- **Limited in Number:** VTM's skill list is deliberately limited. This is to ensure that players and Storytellers don't have to memorize long lists of obscure items, and also because each skill now provides minor mechanical benefits—benefits that can add up very quickly! Rather than creating a new skill, try offering new uses for existing ones, expanding the scope without increasing the overall number.
- **Breadth vs. Specialization:** A character with many skills at low levels will have access to a significant number of minor mechanics, providing a great deal of utility. A character that instead specializes in a few skills and purchases them to maximum levels will have an advantage when using those skills in static and opposed challenges (both offensively and defensively).

Simple Customizations

- *Fields of Study:* Creating a list of specific fields of study for preexisting skills can help a Storyteller portray the scope of her game. For a chronicle set in Rome or the Dark Ages, a list of fields of study such as Herbalism (under Medicine) or Cavalry Tactics (under Leadership) might help players grasp the feel of the chronicle and tune their characters to that theme.
- *Specialized Backgrounds:* Storytellers can highlight a particular background by allowing players to choose from a list of minor bonuses each time they purchase a dot. The Haven background is a good template for this type of enhancement.

Powers and Techniques

Elder powers are static things, created by ancient and powerful vampires over centuries of research. Techniques, on the other hand, are idiosyncrasies, formulated (or stumbled upon) by thin-blooded vampires (usually Caitiff). Players commonly ask the Storyteller to allow custom powers, justifying an item's creation with a character's "long history of study" or "strange mix of disciplines." Storytellers should be aware that custom powers and techniques can significantly imbalance a chronicle, both because of the new item's power level and simply because the item is tactically unusual. Further, custom powers can become cartoonish and feel out of place within the gothic-punk theme of the game, harming immersion and roleplay. Lastly, allowing some players to create custom powers can make a Storyteller appear biased, providing one player access to an item that others cannot purchase (even if they otherwise meet the requirements). It is better for a Storyteller to give the power a visual or theme-based customization without changing the mechanics, if there is a genuine need.

Current System Design

- *Focus on Common Powers:* Don't allow players to make custom powers involving the disciplines of rare clans and bloodlines. Those unusual character types already have an advantage. If the chronicle is genuinely in need of a unique item, that item should be accessible to the largest majority of characters.
- *Transparency:* Publish any custom rules in your settings document, and make sure that all players are aware of the item's capabilities out-of-character. This may lessen the feeling that the item is a "neat surprise" for the creator, but it will go far toward ensuring that other players understand the item's limits, and maintaining Storyteller trust from the rest of the player base.

Simple Customizations

- *Change the Feel:* Storytellers can give already-existing powers a visual or theme-based customization without changing the mechanics, if there is a genuine need. A character or NPC that is intended to be "spooky" may use the mechanics of the Thaumaturgical Path of Weather Control, but the visuals may depict the effects of haunted house rather than environmental anomalies.
- *Requirements:* A Storyteller who wishes to incorporate a certain technique or elder power more broadly in her campaign might alter the requirements of the preexisting power. If your chronicle requires all vampires to potentially teleport through shadows, the Storyteller might give the elder power Shadowstep an appropriate experience cost and make it available for purchase by all characters. So long as the power is openly accessible, game balance will be generally maintained.

Sect Status

The status system is specifically designed to promote the ideals and tenets of a specific sect of vampires within the setting, providing in-character punishments to characters who do not properly adhere to the sect's social doctrines (even the hypocritical ones), and rewarding those who are willing to promote those ideals or support the sect hierarchy. Giving status (or imposing a new status ban) allows a Storyteller to communicate and enforce vampire society's ideal of "appropriate" and "inappropriate" behavior.

Current System Design

- *Discourage Collectors:* The core of the status system is in the flow of earning and spending status. Characters should be encouraged to maintain a fairly constant flow of temporary status, not to hoard an accumulation in order to have "the most." A character's number is not important; it's the use of status, and how it alters political situations, which makes these mechanics meaningful. Spending and regaining status is an important tool to encourage players to roleplay, making them actively create and maintain alliances. Storytellers should avoid giving weight to the number of status traits a character possesses, because this will cause the status system to stagnate.

Simple Customizations

- *Status Bans:* A sect's status bans help enforce a sect's views in the social setting of a chronicle. If a sect places a ban on the possession of certain merits, disciplines, or backgrounds, it sends a strong statement about that sect's