

Powered by the Dark

Vampire: the Masquerade

This is a PbtA hack for **Vampire: the Masquerade**. Read *Apocalypse World* or *Monsterhearts* for the fundamentals of *World games, particularly the philosophy of how to run them. Short version: be a fan of the PCs, fuck with them relentlessly to keep the story hopping, don't sweat the piddly shit, treat NPCs like stolen cars (you can have fun with them but you can't keep 'em), who really gives all that much of a shit about combat turn order, and when PCs miss a roll, either fuck them with harm or a Condition or give someone an Edge for seeing them screw up, or do something to kick the story into a higher gear. There are more details in Storyteller's section, below.

This isn't a stand-alone product. You need a **Vampire: the Masquerade** corebook, preferably 20th Anniversary Edition, to use this, because it doesn't reproduce things like the Aura color chart or hierarchies of sin for Humanity/Paths, nor does it actually give you a setting rundown.

[And this is a developer commentary document on the hack, exclusive to my Patreon backers. All developer commentary is in bolded brackets, like so. Let's get cracking!]

Rolling Dice

You only ever roll dice when someone says something to trigger a move. Then you pick up 2d6, roll them, add them together, add an Attribute modifier, and that's your result. If it's 6 or under, it's a miss. 7-9 is a success, but with some kind of complication. 10+, you get what you're after.

Players roll dice. The Storyteller never rolls dice.

Experience

At the end of each session of play, get 2 experience.

When you *botch a move* (see below) get 1 experience.

Certain moves can give you experience.

Finally, at the beginning of each session, each player takes the sheet of the player on their left and puts a little mark on an Attribute of their choice, as long as it isn't the character's highest Attribute. Mark an Attribute that you'd like to see that character demonstrate during the coming session. The first time during the session that you make a move with your marked Attribute, get 1 experience and then erase the mark. Erase the mark at the end of the session if it isn't already erased.

When you accumulate 6 experience, you can take an *advance* at the end of the session, and then erase all experience.

[Automatic experience at end of session keeps things rolling forward, because a lot of subsequent mechanics rely on advances, and because advances are fun.]

I considered using the fail-forward mechanic from *Dungeon World*, but ultimately dismissed it in favor of XP-for-botching. More on that in the section on botches.

Marking Attributes comes from *Monsterhearts*—it’s a fun little mechanic to push other players out of their comfort zones and to keep groups from falling into well-oiled ‘specialist’ play. Sometimes it’s fun to see the bruiser try to talk their way through a situation, or the brains of the outfit to kick down a door.

Overall, advances are supposed to come in every two sessions or so, so that you’re always either getting something new, or just about to get something new. Opportunities are deliberately limited, though, so that you’re not constantly on the hunt for XP, distracting you from the game itself.]

Advances

When you take an advance, you can choose one of the following to enhance your character:

- Add +1 to an Attribute. You can only take this advance twice.
- Get a new Background, but only if the story supports it. You can take this advance more than once.
- Gain pull with a faction you’ve made some inroads into infiltrating, befriending, blackmailing, or otherwise getting some influence over in the story. Your pull with a new faction starts at +0.
- Add +1 to your pull with a faction you’ve got pull with, but only if the story supports it. You can take this advance more than once.
- Get a new move from one of your Clan Disciplines. You can take this advance as many times as you want.
- Get a new move from a Discipline your Clan doesn’t specialize in, but only with guidance from a teacher who knows that Discipline. If what they’re teaching you isn’t one of their Clan Disciplines, you can’t learn any moves from them that require you to have already learned a certain number of moves in that Discipline. You can take this advance as many times as you want.
- Stabilize *turmoil of the spirit* to regain lost Humanity/Path. See the section on Humanity/Path loss for more on this.
- Begin or complete *seeking lost grace* or *seeking greater enlightenment*. See the section on raising Humanity/Path for more on this.

[Most PbtA games are designed for very limited advancement. Vampire, on the other hand, is intended for long chronicles. As a result, there are several functionally unlimited ‘advance sinks,’ and you can plunk advances into your Disciplines for a *long* time. More on the ‘sinks’ as we hit their particular sections.]

Attribute advances, however, remain very tightly limited because one of the limitations of the PbtA engine is that it doesn't have a lot of traits to raise, and its bonuses are very strongly bounded. Having an entire group quickly jam their way up to identical +3s across the board would be boring as hell.]

Botches

When you miss on a move, you can tell the Storyteller you want to convert the miss into a *botch*, and get 1 experience. How exactly a botch manifests is entirely up to the Storyteller, but something *bad* is going to happen.

Be aware that the Storyteller can make a miss hurt as bad as they want to even if you don't ask for a botch; they're under *no* obligation not to open up with both barrels any time they think it would push the story somewhere interesting. All converting to a botch does take away the Storyteller's option of letting you off light.

[This is a mechanic cannibalized from the 2e Chronicles of Darkness games. Originally I considered using Dungeon World's "fail-forward" mechanic (where you get 1 XP whenever you miss a move), but decided that it lent too upbeat and 'heroic' a feel. Vampire is ultimately a gothic-punk game of personal horror; I'd rather emphasize the arbitrary cruelty of the universe (courtesy of your Storyteller's sadistic streak) casting you into your darkest hour as a moment of growth, rather than letting every little bump in the road propel you forward. Invite pain into your story, and profit thereby!

I also considered it important to point out that the existence of voluntary botches wasn't supposed to implicitly tie the Storyteller's hands when it came time to play hard moves. I don't want this mechanic to be responsible for a player going "What the *fuck* dude, that was just a miss—I didn't call in a botch!"

The universe will punch you in the face sometimes, no matter what. You just get to lead with your chin sometimes and recoup some benefit out of it. That also, I think, fits with the feel of trying to push your way through eternity as one of the Damned.]

Attributes

You have three Attributes, which you combine with the results of 2d6 to find the outcome of rolls.

When you make your vampire, pick one Attribute to be rated at +1, one to be rated at +0, and one to be rated at -1. Attributes cannot *ever* be higher than +3.

The Attributes are:

Physical: Strong, fast, tough, fit. Governs the following moves: *Fuck them up, do something athletic, run for it.*

Social: Smooth, sophisticated, insightful, sexy. Governs the following moves: *Manipulate someone, stand your ground, show your teeth.*

Mental: Clever, cunning, sharp, quick-witted. Governs the following moves: *Navigate a system, do something shady, read their eyes.*

[Generally speaking, I start any PbtA project by considering appropriate Attributes/Traits/whatever you want to call them, and then appropriate moves to slot into them. The traits generally signpost what a PbtA game is *about*.

Vampire resisted this. Vampire is *about* a shitload of things. I tried a generic-ish set of dark edgy traits like Hot, Cold, Vicious, Smooth, etc, but they felt like empty posturing (and not in a good, Camarilla-ish way, but rather in a “game developer is throwing shit at the wall” way). Then I briefly considered using the Virtues (Courage, Compassion, Self-Control, Instinct, etc), but that said the wrong thing. That said *Vampire is a game about your personal convictions*, and yeah, it *is* that, but is how much ass you kick really dependent on your Courage? What moves ought to slot to Compassion? Because most Kindred are going to be shit at that, if the books are anything to go by, so it can’t be anything important like social intrigue.

Ultimately, I realized that the best ideas I had when I started (Humanity loss/gain, how the Beast behaves) didn’t really rely on Virtues or Virtue-like traits *at all*, and that the themes of Vampire pull in so many directions that trying to encapsulate them all in the arrangement of the Attributes would require either false signposting, or chopping away big hunks of the game I wanted to keep. That’s when I first considered just using the Big Three division that makes up the beginning of dot-placement when you make a character in V:tM: Physical, Social, Mental.

They don’t really *mean* much of anything from a thematic standpoint, but they strongly speak to *what your character is like*, and I decided I liked that as a function for Attributes. Attributes make a strong basic statement of *what kind of character you’re playing* in the original game. “My character is smart,” “My character is a manipulator,” “My character’s a bruiser.” Those can be boiled down to the good old Attribute categories.

Abilities, I quickly realized, could be discarded. Abilities/skills help define what characters can do, but Vampire isn’t really *about* your skills, which is probably part of the reason why they’ve fluctuated so much between editions. A few character concepts revolve around them, sure (Hacker, academic, doctor) but only a few, and those concepts could all do without in this hack.]

Pull

Pull is a kind of “extra Attribute” you can have, representing political, hierarchical, monetary, or personal sway over an organization, group, or network of people. Pull represents your ability to get things done in your city. Pull cannot be rated higher than +3 or lower than -3.

Pull is mostly there for “standard” Camarilla-style political games, where an important element of play is accumulating influence over mortal assets and institutions within a city, and where amassing pull with a group some other vampire thinks of as “their territory” is a great way to make enemies.

This hack comes with a ready-to-run list of example groups you might develop pull with in a typical city, but be aware *this list is not exhaustive*. You can clip out groups that don't make sense or aren't interesting in the place you've set your game. You can add new groups that seem compelling or relevant to your setting, too, like "the ports" or "Chinatown" or "British expats" or "the studios" or "regulated gambling" or "the Muslim community." You can also break factions apart into independent groups if schisms or turf wars or competition within a niche are interesting, like splitting organized crime into two or three specific rival gangs or groups, or splitting "regulated gambling" into specific hotel-casinos on the Vegas strip.

You can also, of course, dispense with pull completely if it's just not relevant to the kind of game you're running. A nomadic Sabbath pack selling its services as crusaders-on-the-go to the highest-bidding bishop isn't going to be a game that has a lot of use for this mechanic, for example.

Ready-to-run/example groups include:

Academia: Higher education, universities, libraries, museums. Academia gives access to cutting-edge research, well-indexed information, and maybe the opportunity to fool around with a cursed sarcophagus after hours.

Bohemians: Artists, poets, writers, the coffeehouse crowd: a vast pool of potential talent quietly skirting the edge of starvation by the grace of ramen noodles and rent-share lofts. Some potential diamonds, if you're willing to sift for them.

Business: Finance, heavy industry, corporate structures, banks: the big thick vein that most of a city's wealth runs through. This is a good faction to consider splitting up into sub-groups.

City Hall: Zoning permits, city politics, and a chance to get proposals and policies to shake out the way you want them to.

The Church: Opiate of the masses, the church is an institution unto itself, as well as a mighty voice to guide the opinions and outlooks of many of the city's social strata. And, of course, priests know where all the bodies are buried.

The Courts: Lawyers, judges, and collections of the two. Pull with the law can be invaluable when you need to get someone into or out of trouble in a hurry.

High Society: The great and the good throw the best parties, or at least the most well-dressed ones. When people say "networking," these are the people they're thinking of, and they can open just about any door for you. If you're the right sort.

Law Enforcement: The fuzz. If you can't think of something useful to do with cops in your back pocket, well, rest assured, someone else will.

Little People: Secretaries, janitors, clerks, caterers: the service industry, the invisible small folks that keep the world running. They usually can't do much more than look, listen, or open a door, but sometimes that's all you need. Often overlooked, often in need of a helping hand.

Media: Newspapers, blogs, Youtube influencers, the six o'clock news. Still the most dangerous people in the world to the Kindred.

Medicine: Hospitals, morgues, family practices. Dangerous places to go looking for favors, but far too useful to overlook.

Occult Underground: Most cities have a subculture of weirdos if you dig diligently enough. And somewhere in that bric-a-brac clutter of nonsense, sometimes there are a few people who know what they're on about, or lucked (?) into an item or book with real power. Even if it's all hokum, it may be hokum that can act as a useful smokescreen.

Organized Crime: Could be gangs. Could be the mob. Could be the Russians. This is where the drugs, the guns, the muscle, and the fast money live—assuming you can't pry the cops loose from whoever's already got them locked up tight, anyhow.

The Street: At the bottom rung of the city you'll find people hanging on by their fingernails—way more of them than anyone likes to acknowledge. In a world where the dead presidents don't show their faces too much, you end up with a favor economy, and if you can't always quite assume loyalty, well, fear usually works for a while. This is a good place to disappear when things get hot.

Unions: Between the haves and the have-nots, you'll find the folks trying that whole strength in numbers thing. Unions can do a lot: gum up the gears of the city, sometimes; exercise serious sway on their membership, at least. And there's always someone at the top who'd like to see them goaded into sabotaging themselves, of course. Beware of Brujah already dug in like ticks.

[The actual list of pull groups is arbitrary and based on doodling the first few groups that came to mind, then trawling through *The Gilded Cage* to see if I'd missed anything obvious. (I had; City Hall and a few others got added at that point.)

Pull is inspired directly by the Favors/Renown system in *Fallen London*. I first started thinking about city factions as an embedded game mechanic a few months ago when I was considering doing a *Victorian Age: Vampire* campaign set in London. That campaign never went anywhere, but the factions-as-explicit mechanic idea did.

As it stands, Pull is essentially a set of specialized Attributes that you can fight other vampires (and potentially even mages and other NPCs) for control over. It can also be jettisoned completely with no real pain or difficulty if that kind of influence/control-peddling isn't a part of Vampire that interests you, and this too is by design; nothing outside of the pull mechanic really interacts with it, so the game doesn't experience any kind of cascade failure if you chuck the whole thing over the side.]

Modifiers

You can never put a bigger modifier than +3 or -3 on a roll.

When a move says to *carry 1 forward*, that's PbtA slang for “add a +1 bonus to your next move.” When it says to *carry 1 forward ongoing* it means to add a +1 bonus until whatever's adding the bonus stops doing that.

Standard Moves

Every character can do all the basic moves.

You *must* use a move whenever the conversation around the table dictates it. What that means is that when the Sabbat is smashing down the door and you say “fuck this, I bail out the window and make a run for it,” you are now using the *run for it* move because that’s what you’ve made the story say.

You *can’t* use a move if the events in the narrative don’t support it. If you’re dragged before the Prince in chains, you can’t just announce “I *run for it*.” The Storyteller’s proper response there is to go “How, exactly? Seems like you need to deal with those chains and the two ghouls dragging you before you can think about making a break for it.”

[I like symmetry in move numbers between Attributes, as a general design thing. There are reasons *not* to do that—forced symmetry is rarely a good thing—but all other things being even, I always feel better if various arenas of investment offer similar levels of reward for investment, and I don’t like over-consolidating mechanical power in one place]

Physical Moves

These moves add your physical modifier to their roll.

Fuck them up

When you try to hurt or kill someone, roll with physical. On a 10+, you inflict harm as established, and pick one: the harm is great (add 1 harm); you gain an Edge on your enemy; you inflict a Condition on your enemy. On a 7-9, you harm them but the Storyteller chooses one: they gain an Edge on you; they deal you harm in return; the Beast stirs.

Do something athletic

When you perform some feat of strength, agility, or toughness with serious consequences for failure, roll with physical. On a 10+, you succeed at the action and choose one: clear a Condition; carry +1 forward on your next move. On a 7-9, you succeed, but choose one: You take 1 harm; your success is incomplete or flawed in some way; the Beast stirs.

Run for it

When you try to escape from danger, roll with physical. On a 10+, you get away and end up in a safe place. On a 7-9, you get away, but choose one: you cause a big scene; the scariest person present gets an Edge on you; you lose something along the way; the Beast stirs.

[There are plenty of physical activities that you *do* in Vampire—driving, picking locks, whatever—but most of them aren’t important as distinct fields of endeavor, so I tried to collapse them all down to as simple and iconic a trio as I could: three moves that would be applicable to any mode of Vampire. It was pretty easy, really. Celerity and Potence both speak to the importance of expressing your physical superiority over other people as a vampire, and *do something athletic* was a simple catch-all for that. Vampire is a game about getting in over your head, and when a pack of Lupines are baying at your door... well, there’s a lot of tension in the question of whether or not you can get *out* of the trouble you’re in.]

Combat is a given. This is an RPG.

What I *didn't* think was important was giving much of a shit about whether you were fucking someone up with your fists, or a baseball bat, or an antique sword, or a mall katana, or a shotgun, or whatever the hell. That can mostly be adjudicated by the fiction at the table and the harm rules. You don't need me to tell you that if all you have is a switchblade, and you're under fire from a sniper on a roof, you can't *fuck them up* until you first address the problem of getting them into switchblading range. You already know that.]

Social Moves

These moves add your social modifier to their roll.

Manipulate someone

When you manipulate or seduce someone, roll with social. If you succeed, NPCs will do what you ask if you give them a bribe, a threat, or a motive; PCs get a point of experience for doing what you want. On a 10+, you also choose one: you gain an Edge on them; you give them a Condition. On a 7-9, you overplay your hand just a bit and they get an Edge on you.

Stand your ground

When you stand your ground in the face of intimidation, hardship, pain, pressure, fear, or overwhelming despair, roll with social. On a 10+, you stand your ground and choose one: remove a Condition; carry +1 forward to your next move in the scene. On a 7-9, you remain resolute, but the Beast stirs.

Show your teeth

When you attempt to shut someone down, get them to back off their current course of action, or intimidate them, roll with social. On a 10+, PCs have to *stand their ground* and NPCs freeze up. Additionally, choose one: give them a Condition; they lose an Edge on you; you gain an Edge on them; you quell the Beast. On a 7-9, choose one: they have to *stand their ground* (PCs) or freeze up (NPCs); give them a Condition.

[Social was pretty easy to collapse; the WoD games have always had issues with redundant or overlapping social skills, after all. *Manipulate someone* is the classic PbtA social move that shows up in some minor permutation in most games that use the system. *Show your teeth* is an equally standard intimidation move, which pretty much covers vampiric interaction: schmooze someone to get what you want, or scare the shit out of someone to get what you want. *Stand your ground* is a mixture of *Dungeon World's defy danger* and *Monsterhearts' hold steady*. Considering how many bigger fish there are swimming around in the night than your average neonate, and how chock-full the game is of agency-smashing stuff like Presence, the hack absolutely *needed* a "hold it together"-style move, especially considering there's no Willpower resource analog.]

Mental Moves

These moves add your mental modifier to their roll.

Navigate a system

Whether searching (or hacking) a computer database to find (or alter) information, working out which palms to grease to set up a meeting with the Giovanni, or reading market trends to pull off a financial coup, whenever you *navigate a system* you roll with mental. On a 10+, you achieve your goal, and choose two: you achieve your goal in a timely fashion; you get everything you're after; you carry +1 forward; you quell the Beast. On a 7-9, you achieve your goal, and choose one from the 10+ list.

Do something shady

Whether stealing a priceless painting, sneaking into a guarded facility, or slipping your blood into the police chief's drink, when you *do something shady*, you roll with mental. On a 10+, you succeed and choose two: your activity goes completely unnoticed, leaving behind no incriminating traces; you carry +1 forward; you quell the Beast. On a 7-9, you succeed and choose one: your activity goes completely unnoticed, leaving behind no incriminating traces; the Beast doesn't stir.

Read their eyes

Whether by extended observation or leading conversation, whenever you try to figure out what makes someone tick, roll with mental. On a 10+, gain an Edge. On a 7-9, you gain an Edge on them, but they also get an Edge on you.

[The mental moves took the most consideration. *Do something shady* went in first, because all Kindred are fundamentally criminals and will do sketchy shit to make it through the night sooner or later. *Read their eyes* is a good old risk-reward move for a game about jumpy supernatural predators who live and die by how well they can read other vampires' poker faces. *Navigate a system* took the most consideration, because it had to pull duty for a bunch of missing skills: Academics, Bureaucracy, Finance, Etiquette, Streetwise, even Computers. It's not glamorous, but as any Nosferatu player can tell you, *it gets shit done.*]

Special Moves

Every vampire can do all the special moves as well, but they're a little more particular or situational than the standard moves.

Call in a favor

When you call in favors with a faction, roll with your pull with that faction. On a 10+ you get the favor and choose two. On a 7-9, you get the favor and choose one: There are no complications; they don't demand something in return; your pull isn't reduced by 1.

[*Call in a favor* is nothing more or less than the lever you pull to deploy your pull. Making pull expendable was directly inspired by the *Fallen London* and how it handles faction rep. It also allows for more player expression: do you zealously guard the prestige and security of your influence even above the utility it provides you? Or are you the sort who's willing

to burn bridges and cash in hard-won sway *right now* if it gets you what you want, and tomorrow can worry about tomorrow?]

Make preparations

When you **spend time training, practicing, studying, or preparing to do something, define what you're preparing for and** gain Prep. You gain 1 Prep for every 2 nights spent preparing. When that training and preparation pays off, you can spend 1 Prep to get +1 to any roll. You can only spend 1 Prep per roll.

[*Make preparations* points to the inherently cautious and scheming nature of the Kindred. I lifted it more or less directly from *Sixth World*, an excellent PbtA hack for *Shadowrun*, where it's used to get ready for runs.]

Awaken during the day

When you need to awaken during the day in response to some disturbance, or remain awake after the sun rises, roll with Humanity/Path. On a 10+, you can stay awake for an hour or two. On a 7-9, you can stay awake for ten or fifteen minutes. On a miss, you fall into deathly slumber or fail to awaken until you're disturbed again.

[This was the last mechanic added to the game. Originally I was going to just leave it to the fiction, but there were enough Disciplines (especially in various blood sorcery rituals) that incidentally pointed to it that it ended up feeling like an omission. So, here's a move for waking up during the day.]

Drink blood

When you drink someone's blood, roll with Humanity/Path. You get 1 blood and they're *drained* until they get a few days of rest and recovery, or something along the lines of a transfusion. On a 10+, choose 3. On a 7-9, choose 2. On a miss, choose 1:

- You gain 1 extra blood.
- You gain 1 extra blood.
- When the Kiss wears off, they don't realize what you did to them.
- You quell the Beast.
- They definitely don't die. You can't pick this if they're *drained*.

[The un-beating heart of the game in many respects. It's inspired, of course, by a similar move in *Monsterhearts*, especially that wonderful little bullet at the end. How careful do you want to be? How bad do you need blood? How much do you *care*? How many plates are you juggling right now, between the Beast and the power the blood affords and the

Masquerade and your Humanity? How bad do you need relief? And is a human life the plate you're willing to drop, knowing full well it may shatter? "Of course not," you might say now, but I don't let you stockpile a lot of blood.

Play and find out how much you're willing to risk to hold that line. That's the whole game, really, at least in several major approaches to play.]