

# Mark Rein•Hagen's Foundational Influence on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Vampiric Media

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## Abstract

Mark Rein•Hagen's role-playing game Vampire: The Masquerade, set in the World of Darkness shared universe, is foundational to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century vampire. We aim to, through the cultural analysis of how ideas have been transferred from this role-playing game to other media, clearly demonstrate Mark Rein•Hagen's cultural historical significance.

**Keywords** #vampire, #media, #role-playing game, #werewolf; #subcreation

## Academia in Darkness

Lesuire is but the part of our life where we can devote ourselves most fully to culture: culture that has become ever more rewarding as the number of media through which we practice it have increased, each enriching the other. One of the iconic figures of this media-enriched culture is the vampire, who, within the last few decades, has loomed large enough to attract the attention of scholars; previous explanations of this phenomenon have focused on Bram Stoker's

novel *Dracula* and the serial works of Anne Rice, along with vampire movies such as Friedrich Wilhelm "F. W." Murnau's *Nosferatu*, the Hammer Films of the 1960s, Joel Schumacher's *The Lost Boys*, and TV-series such as Joseph Hill "Joss" Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. 21<sup>st</sup> century vampire culture hunters have continued this pursuit in the more noticeable forms of media (Steiger 2009, Click et al. 2010, Parke & Wilson 2011, Wilson 2011, Olson 2011, Anatol 2011, Edwards & Agnieszka 2012, Morey 2012, Piatti-Farnell 2013, Brodman & Doan 2013).

A few have even studied them as they appear in the media of tabletop role-playing games. This has its challenges. The most widely quoted academic book about role-playing games, according to Google Scholar, is Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy* (1983). This study is more than thirty years old and examines role-players and their community like an anthropologist would study a mysterious native tribe. Even within gamer culture itself, Internet sites such as TV Tropes habitually confuse them with collectable card games or war games (though role-playing games did, admittedly, develop from the latter). They are only mass media to the extent that the texts of the systems they are based on are: highly interactive, their primary audience is the players themselves. They do not even have the graphics and audio of computer role-playing games. Yet this seemingly inaccessible media may, researchers now believe, be a vital stage in the evolution of vampirism as we know it today. To quote Arlene Russo:

"One of the best sources of vampire material, which brings the vampire into the modern era, is *Vampire: The Masquerade* by White Wolf. Although it is a role-playing game, which is not everyone's cup of tea, it is still cornucopia of interesting ideas. Plus, it helps bring new blood into the vampire scene" (Russo 2005: 105).

Other researchers who have taken notice of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, or *V:TM*, are Rachel Werkman (2001), Mary Y. Hallab (Hallab 2009), Rachel Mizej Ward (2009), and Michael Wolski; the latter contrasts the game with traditional Polish vampire lore, and suggests that it could be used for educational purposes, or even a tool for research: "Hence, the rules of *The Masquerade* offer a complete and

relatively consistent system unifying the sometimes contrary views of vampirism, and might serve as a basis for their comparison.” (Wolski 2013, p. 171). Yet, these are but indicative spots of illumination in a darkly immense necropolis. This article is yet another – be warned: the subject matter is labyrinthine, indeed.

Mark Rein•Hagen (his name then included a dot) published *Vampire: The Masquerade (V:TM)* back in 1991. It focused more on storytelling than many previous, more agonistic and aleatory, games of its type (Fannon 1999). It is important to keep in mind that tabletop role-playing is derived from wargaming, and that most of the subcreations in which it took place were self-contained fantasy worlds along the lines of Tolkien's Arda. V:TM was set in our own contemporary urban reality, except for the secret existence of vampires – and equally supernatural beings such as werewolves, mages, wraiths, and changelings. All of these supernatural beings together formed the basis of the subcreation named *World of Darkness (WoD)*. The reason for all this secrecy was that even though vampires are super-powered immortals, they have to contend with the more numerous and potentially hostile (as necessitated by the vampires own diet), not to mention progressive, (by reason of their very mortality) living humans. To ensure this cover up, a variety of vampire clans got together and established the Camarilla, an undead conspiracy. And you as a player got to play – not mortal vampire hunters – but one of the vampires. You were about to play a monster, a lost soul, member of an order of being that in more traditional role-playing games would be an antagonists, rather than protagonists. Your character would have supernatural powers that would grant it supremacy over the masses it fed upon. Even so, the game was set up as a tragedy. Your character's powers were the tools of a victimizing appetite; the more you exploited both, the more monstrous your character would become until it was a mere mindless, amoral beast (Rein•Hagen 1991). Characters “won” the game by practicing various forms of self-restraint, such as only subsisting on animal blood (a practise called “vegetarianism” in the game) – in theory, that is.

It wasn't the first time a role-playing game had such a setup. The ten years senior *Call of Cthulhu* was a role-playing game, in which player characters investigated the subcreation of H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos, going insane thereby. The goal was unlock as

many secrets as possible and to avert the advent of unknowable cosmic Gods before insanity, death, or the loss of credit rating ensued. But the final outcome would inevitably be dire (Tresca 2011, Leavenworth 2014). In V:TM, you now played the monsters. But in both games, loss of character rationality also meant that the player lost control of that character.

Creating a role-playing game in which story and character development are not an epic saga of on-going achievements and becoming progressively more powerful, but a personal defeat, is not just a difficult task, it requires an intimate understanding of how game mechanics work and how players react, especially as it goes contrary to what is traditionally expected of role-playing games. Sandy Petersen accomplished this task with *Call of Cthulhu*. Mark Rein•Hagen almost accomplished the same feat; however, in actual play, his rules (including an intricate Latinate terminology lovingly detailing the various vampiric powers, or “disciplines”, as well as the social system by which “elder”, mostly non-player characters, vampires exploited their less empowered offspring) succeed all too well in seducing players, or, worse, the Storyteller (Mark Rein•Hagen's term for a game Master) into the abuse of power, resulting in chronicles (or game campaigns) that are little more than brief combat simulations, or in which players are denied the free interactivity that makes role –playing games interesting. Nevertheless, played either way, V:TM creates challenging stories, can be emotional fulfilling to play, and has a distinct gothic punk style. Above all, its bold experimentation with concepts and rules has left an impact both on other role-playing games and beyond.

In order to study these fictional worlds of vampirism, we have drawn upon the theory of subcreation introduced by J. R. R. Tolkien. From this point of view, our real world is the primary world, whilst fictional constructs are what Tolkien terms secondary worlds. The process of creating a secondary world in the primary world, one that require rational exploration in the same manner as the primary world does, is called sub-creation; hence, a secondary world may also be referred to as a sub-creation. Furthermore, the designer or creator of a secondary world is called a sub-creator (Tolkien 1947, Wolf 2012).

## The Masquerade

Tabletop role-playing games are primarily based on textual material, though written with the intention of producing performative results. Its sub-creator, and the material s/he had at hand, is an important source in understanding that text.

On January 26-27<sup>th</sup> 2015, Lars Konzack interviewed Mark Rein-Hagen (Mark no longer uses the dot – this way we can distinguish the Mark Rein-Hagen of today from his former self) for this article, and Mark Rein-Hagen was both clear and comprehensive as to his sources. A large part was played by the various vampire movies of the 1980s, not merely the abovementioned *Lost Boys* (1987), or movies such as *Hunger* (1983) or *Near Dark* (1987), but even vampiric comedy movies, of which there seems to have been a large number at the time. Another was literary and cinematic depictions of the Mafia, as well as Niccolò Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (the leaders of V:TM's Camarilla society are entitled "Princes"), as material for his own vampiric society; science fiction authors such as Robert A. Heinlein and Isaac Asimov, who inspired him with, in Marks own works, "their great ARCS of history"; and general horror writers such as Stephen King or H. P. Lovecraft, the latter being of special interest due to the role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu*. Last but certainly not least, there were the classics: Bram Stoker, the movie *Nosferatu* (1922), and, of course, Anne Rice.

Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* were of primary importance because, like V:TM, they present a world in which there exist an entire secret community of vampires, vampires without the quaint folkloristic powers (such as transforming into bats) and weaknesses (such as garlic) of their early 20<sup>th</sup> century ancestors. Even, more importantly, it is seen from the perspective of a vampire (Ramsland 1993). The protagonist of *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) is the vampire; his story is one of awakening to his monstrous yet intense nature and the gradual discovery of others of his kind. This is one of the ways that secondary worlds can be used to decouple ordinary views of the primary world; by putting the primary world (our real world) into perspective via the secondary or imaginary world (Tolkien 1947). By doing so it becomes easier to think unconventional thoughts and accept a world in transition, because readers of the imaginary already have an idea that the world can be perceived and understood very differently if its premises are altered. As a conse-

quence, people relating to imaginary worlds, whether they be medieval fantasies or distant planets, are often better suited to cope with changes in their own world view. They have prepared themselves to think outside the box because they habitually experience many different worlds (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995, Bacon-Smith 2000, Wolf 2012). This is also what makes the Chronicles of special interest from a game world design perspective.

But to reduce V:TM to being a simulation of Anne Rice's Chronicles is far too simplistic. Not only had there, by the time Mark Rein•Hagen had started designing his game, been a succulent growth in new portrayals of the vampire in various media (often due to Rice), such as the vampire movie boom of the 1980s, but role-playing games as a media have requirements and tendencies different from those of fictional narratives. Rice's novels were useful due to their subcreational traits (there has been an entire encyclopaedia written about them (Ramsland 1993), but in this case an even greater degree of background detail was needed, not merely due to the interactivity of several player character protagonists, but because narrative details are developed in play, rather than the game setting; it, instead, has to provide the materials from which narrative is performed. The abovementioned tendency of tabletop role-playing to use Tolkien-inspired subcreations is a direct result of this media requirement. In Marks own words, he created "a whole society of Vampires (not just a couple as in Anne Rice)", an entire subcreation underlying our world, complete with its own Old Testament creation myth (the first Vampire was the Biblical Cain), holy scripture – The Book of Nod – status, vampire bloodlines (each with its own subculture, mystical specialities and weaknesses; the Toreador clan were based on the Anne Rice vampire, the Nosferatu clan was inspired by, obviously, the movie *Nosferatu*, the Gangrel clan was closer to the vampires in *Lost Boys*, and so forth. Mark Rein-Hagen says that this, to him, "seemed like the right number, each expressed a different trope of the idea of a Vampire... yet didn't remind you of a, god forbid, a character class or TV trope. They intermeshed well as units of a society." The number was later increased to 13, and political ideologies, such as that of the Camarilla, inspired, Mark Rein-Hagen clarified, by "the Sicilian code of Omertà – silence being the primary duty". Furthermore he expressed appreciation of games and settings that have well-organized social groups in them, be-



cause that allows for intricate politics and interactions, such as the Camarillas war with its rival vampiric organization, the Sabbat, a sect of vampire extremists, organized in "covens", who wage war by creating, or "embracing", large numbers of new vampires as cannon fodder, headquartered in Mexico City. And not merely for vampires – a motif oft repeated in later derived media is the (dramatically fruitfull) conflict between vampires and werewolves, whom Mark Rein•Hagen had given an equally detailed (ecoterrorist, extradimensional, partially Native American) society, as he did to each of the other major orders of supernatural beings, in turn.

In fact, WoD is a role-playing game of competing paradigms. Vampires, werewolves, mages, wraiths and changelings – each have their own explanation of how the World of Darkness functions, including, ominously, variant eschatologies as to the end of same world. This means it becomes a role-playing game in which there is no final explanation to how the world functions, and in which all of these world views can be challenged and discussed during game sessions.

Thanks to the success of the role-playing game, and his World of Darkness setting in general, Mark Rein•Hagen got the chance to turn V:TM into a TV-series named *Kindred: The Embraced* (1996). It aired eight episodes for one season only, and was then cancelled. It is difficult to say if it simply came too early, but it certainly failed to engage the target demographic. Even though there was some attempt at simplification – the TV-series setting has five vampire clans, rather than the games seven – it may have been too difficult for viewers to grasp the politics and intrigue of multiple factions given the condition of the media at that time. This may seem odd today, given the contemporary success of series such as George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) Mark Rein-Hagen, in the interview, compares the complexity of his world-building to that of Georges, but the viewers of 1996 had yet to develop the habitual use of many media options now taken for granted, such as routinely surfing clues and discussions, or downloading the series oneself, to be viewed at ones leisure, on the internet. The contemporary viewer has, so to say, access to the rulebook. There was a nominal viewpoint character, the living detective Frank Kohanek, but rather than naturally structuring the story around his exploration of undead society, the TV-series then, in the first introductory epi-

sode, focusses on what is arguably the series main character, Julian Luna, Prince of the San Francisco Domain of the Camarilla. In Mark Rein-Hagen's opinion, *Kindred: The Embraced* "failed because they tried to apply the tv formula of the 70's and 80's... one that was in the middle of dying. They promised they wouldn't do that, but they did." Consequently, the TV-series format turned out to be very old fashioned, even for its day.

The V:TM role-playing game and the WoD shared fictional universe were adapted for video game releases as well: *Vampire: The Masquerade – Redemption* (2000), *Hunter: The Reckoning* (2002), *Hunter: The Reckoning – Wayward* (2003), *Hunter: The Reckoning – Redeemer* (2003), and *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* (2004); not to mention the critically acclaimed Jyhad Collectable Card Game (1994: it was renamed *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle*, to avoid association with Islamic extremism, in 1995), which, itself, expanded into *V:TES Online* (2005-2007); and several series of WoD fiction, in amounts usually only rivalled by those derived from large – scale fantasy game worlds, such as TSRs *Dragonlance* line of novels. So far the creations, and terminology, of Mark Rein-Hagen himself; more was to follow-even in such noticeable media as cinema blockbusters and bestselling romance novels.

### **Rein•Hagen inspired vampires**

Joss Whedon's *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (1992) was originally a vampire action-comedy movie, but in 1997 it was turned into the gothic television series *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). It had everything that *Kindred: The Embraced* didn't. Rather than viewers having to immediately take in a complex setting in media res, it focused on one character, Buffy, learning how to become a vampire slayer, slowly expanded the universe with supernatural beings. Buffy even developed an relationship with Angel, a vampire bedevilled by a very V:TMish moral conflict. Angel was used as a spin-off character in his own TV-series, *Angel* (1999-2004), one much closer to the ideas of Anne Rice and Mark Rein•Hagen because we perceived the world from the perspective of the vampire. Buffy was most likely not inspired by V:TM; its vampires were of a somewhat pre-anne Rice type (they have amusing vulnerabilities such as garlic, or only being able to enter a house if invited). More to the point, they had no society beyond that of the pack, with the sole exception of The Order of



Aurelius, a cult of vampires devoted to the worship of Lovecraftian Old Ones, that bear some resemblance to Ann Rice's Children of Darkness. The overall impression is that they are, quite appropriately, drawn from a tradition of cinematic horror comedy, or, at most, Anne. If nothing else, it would be uncharacteristic of Joss not to indicate some form of homage if that were the case. This makes Buffy useful as an example of a subcreation parallel to, but not flowing from, that of Mar Rein-Hagens.

The movie trilogy *Blade* (1998), *Blade II* (2002) and *Blade: Trinity* (2004), as well as the television series *Blade: The Series* (2006) and animated series *Blade* (2011), on the other hand, leave little doubt as to the source material for their subcreations vampiric society. The main protagonist, Blade, was a dhampir (a Balkan folkloric word for a "half vampire") vampire hunter, based on the Marvin Arthur "Marv" Wolfman Marvel Comics character from 1973, but the creatures that he slew were organized in 12 family "houses", each with its own subculture, mystical specialities and weaknesses, united for the purpose of keeping the undead secret from the living, had their own sacred scripture-The Bok of Erebus; various levels of status; descended from the Biblical Dagon; and so on. Even individual Houses are conceptually close to those from WoD, such as the Lemure House to Clan Toreador. There are minor variations-some status is not associated with age, but whether one be a "pureblood" – a vampire bred from other vampires, sexually-or one of the despised "turnedbloods", humans who became vampires epidemically- inspired by Blades own family complications, but on the whole, the evidence for direct borrowing is seemingly overwhelming – but only seemingly. One aspect of the cinematic Blade vampire society that does not correspond to WoD's are the abstract heraldic symbols associated with each House: though WoD Clans also have their own heraldic sigils, the design of those of the Houses is closer to those of the vampire Clans of the video game series *Legacy of Kain* (1996-present), that are themselves otherwise derivative of WoD (various colourfully distinct bloodlines descended from Kaine, who, though the game takes place in a gothic fantasy world, all have Biblical-sounding names). Even the WoD-like aspects of the Houses that are not derived from *Legacy of Kain* may have been absorbed indirectly from other sources, as could, for that matter, be the case with the WoD-like elements in *Legacy of Kain*. Considering that

both Marvel and New Line Studios, in connection with the Blade motion picture, and the designers of Legacy of Kaine have been embroiled in copyright lawsuits-though not with WoD's publisher – official clarification of these matters is not very likely.

In the movie Underworld (2003), the WoD elements were also noticeable, to the extent of using the same technical terminology as the game: even its plot has been claimed to derive from a story written by Nancy A. Collins, *The Love of Monsters* (1994), officially set in the WoD. In this case, it was enough to initiate a lawsuit by White Wolf and Nancy A. Collins, in which they filed 17 counts of copyright infringement, and claimed over 80 points of unique similarity between White Wolf's game world and the movie. In September 2003, a judge granted White Wolf an expedited hearing. This lawsuit culminated in a confidential settlement (Ward 2009). It should be said that the Underworld setting does have a science fictional slant absent from WoD, which, whilst not perhaps entirely dignified-it includes cloned blood and bullets filled with liquid ultraviolet light – is, at least, original. Unlike Blade, the characteristically Rein•Hagenian element of a vampire/werewolf war is present in Underworld; indeed, this is the main source of conflict, as it left out many of the complexities of vampire and werewolf society found in Blade and WoD. One would imagine that it is also central to Nancy A. Collins story, which involves a Romeo and Juliet-style tragic love affair between a vampire and werewolf, though romance is rather drowned out by the action-packed Underworld movies incessant bursts of gunfire. But, yet again, the actual transmedial route by which the-by virtue of its nature as a tabletop role-playing world, if nothing else-obscure WoD setting reached the makers of Underworld is difficult to pin down. To name but one example, there are several real-world groups who believe they are actual vampires, and who we know to have used WoD books directly in their belief systems (Keyworth 2002); obviously, members of such a subculture would not make fine distinctions between fact and fiction, let alone their source material. Under such conditions, WoD lore quickly becomes folkloric - but, it is to be stressed, not a folklore of the illiterate.

Stephenie Meyer's bestselling Twilight Saga book series (2005-2008) may well be an example of this. Her tale of a love triangle between a living human girl, a vampire, and a werewolf, takes place in a characteristically WoD-like setting; there is a conflict

between a society of vampires and one of (Native American) werewolves, a group of vampires that enforces vampiric secrecy (called the "Volturi" by Stephenie), vampires have a diversity of special powers similar to WoD's Disciplines (although in *Twilight*, they are individual gifts rather than classes of ability), a segment of vampires prosecute warfare by mass creation of new undead. (The instigator of this practice in *Twilight*, Benito, had Mexico City as his power base, another similarity with WoD's Sabbat sect; for reasons that ought to be obvious, practitioners are as much in conflict with *Twilight's* version of the Camarilla as WoD's Sabbat is, though they do not have an collective appellation). There is even a degree of shared terminology; vampire bloodlines are called "Covens" (again, as with WoD's Sabbat – or Underworld. Or, indeed, as in Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*), vampires who only subsist on animal blood are termed "Vegetarians", and, although WoD uses the characteristically Latinate "Neonate" to describe a new-made vampire, *Twilight's* "Newborn" is a direct translation.

It is highly unlikely that Stephenie Meyer has any clear consciousness of what WoD is. According to her own public statements (Burton 2009, Krohn 2011) she based her *Saga* on a dream. Stephenie has, however, been quite open about acknowledging her debt to less oneirocritical sources of inspiration, such as Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, and, especially, William Shakespeare (Kisor 2010). Elements of her subcreation are also strikingly different from not only those of WoD, but from the conventions of vampire fiction as a whole, most notoriously in that her vampires become mineral lifeforms that sparkle, rather than burn, in direct sunlight: an element she states was present in her initial dream vision (CNN News 2009). All of this points towards the conclusion that Stephenie has absorbed all these elements of the WoD subcreation from a multitude of different media, such as the *Underworld* movie (with its somewhat unusual mixtures of vampire/werewolf romance and large-scale action scenes), something of a testament to the degree to which Mark Rein-Hagen's material has suffused our contemporary cultural milieu-material that the popularity of *Twilight* is mediated even further afield.

### In conclusion

Mark Rein•Hagen creation of the role-playing game Vampire: The Masquerade and the World of Darkness subcreation back in the 1990s has turned out to be central to the continued importance of the vampire in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Its ideas spread from the tabletop role-playing game into movies, television, video games, and romantic fiction. This is of interest in and of itself as a study in cultural history, yet this influence wasn't one the media industry or academia has offered much recognition. In order to satisfactorily explore, and exploit, this cultural process, scholars and academics need to be conscious of the importance on, and impact of, Mark Rein•Hagen's contribution to gothic culture and the media vampire in general. These contributions, based on his V:TM game and VoD subcreation, include: an entire secret vampire society with multiple factions, a correspondingly complex background mythology, and the relations of the undead to other equally detailed supernatural factions, such as the characteristic werewolf conflict; to the degree of constituting a complete imaginary world underlying our own reality.

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