

A Shadow of My Desire

Dotan Dimet, April 27, 2006

Inspiration

A Shadow of My Desire (working title) is a roleplaying game that takes as its inspiration two classic roleplaying games published in 1991, Mark Rein*Hagen's *Vampire: The Masquerade* (White Wolf) and Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless* (Phage Press).

Together, both these games had a remarkable, transformative effect on the hobby and the Israeli scene. *Vampire* gave roleplayers a license for pretentiousness: it told them that roleplaying could be Art, could deal with serious subject matter and best of all, could be sexy and even get them *laid*. *Amber* gave them something to be pretentious *about*: diceless roleplaying lead to systemless roleplaying, what is today known as freeform. *Amber* asserted the GM's supreme authority and creative freedom, bound tightly with the responsibility to provide the players with their own creative freedom. This provided an ideal framework to focus on story, character interaction and wonder. It also made gaming accessible to the new audience that found *Vampire*'s themes and focus appealing. The synergy between both these games really shaped the high-end of the roleplaying scene around me.

Now, I wasn't really part of that scene, and I didn't really get to play these games when they were hot and fresh mindbombs fomenting creative revolution. I was off elsewhere, playing freeform superhero games with my pal Bo.

Thinking about these games and how Bo and I never really got to play them (our other regular gaming bud was right there in the thick of things, back in the day), made me think of mixing the two games. The angle I came up with was a metaphysic expressed as a game mechanic, rather than a setting remix. This game is not about "What if the characters in Roger Zelazny's *Amber* series were Vampires?"; it is about the solipsism that Zelazany uses mostly as window-dressing in *Amber*, it is about the price Vampires need to pay for their hungers and the way that informs their attitude towards humanity; it is about a simple question:

"What do you want, and what will you do once you get it?"

Shadow and Substance

All worlds are shadows of the one real world; all people, place and things are reflections, shadows cast by the light of your desire. Although everything exists, nothing is real. Only you and your brothers are real. You, and the things you desire. Your desire, your *attention*, makes a thing real, elevating it from base shadow, infusing it with substance.

And on its substance, you feed.

Essence

The one thing that matters is Essence. Essence is power, essence is life. You can not exist without it. It is, in a way, the raw stuff of your desire, the one thing you crave: by wanting things, you simply place a shape upon the essence.

Objects of Desire : Destroy Everything You Touch

You must feed; you feed on things that you desire. An object of desire is defined by essential qualities, things which describe it and set it apart from anything else you could imagine. These qualities make it unique. To create an Object of Desire in the game, you invent a person, place or thing, and write its name on a piece of paper – a post-it note or something like that. Below the name, you write three Qualities of this object. A quality consists of a descriptive word or phrase, and can be rated numerically with a number from 1-3. The more qualities an object has, the more "real" it is, and the more essence you can draw from it.

To draw essence from an Object of Desire, you feed upon it.

Normal feeding draws 1 point of essence, doesn't harm the object, and requires spending about 2 hours with the object of desire.

Intense feeding draws 2 points of essence, and leaves the object drained. It requires spending double the amount of time with the object. Draining the object twice in a row (two consecutive days) can reduce one of the object's qualities by 1, or add a negative quality to the object, called a scar.

Harrowing is feeding that draws 3 points of essence, and leaves the object at the edge of collapse. It doesn't require more time spent than intense feeding, but it does require that the intensity of the interaction be increased, in magnitude or brutality. Additionally, you can gain another point of essence by reducing one of the object's qualities and giving (or increasing the rating by 1) of one of its scars (negative qualities). It takes an object a day to recover from a harrowing before it can be used for regular feeding, and 3 days to heal to a level where it can be used for intense feeding again. If it is used for intense feeding before that time, this will either reduce a quality or add or increase a scar.

Feeding to destruction is possible: you gain 5 point of essence, and destroy the object. This is much quicker than regular feeding.

You need 1 point of essence per "day" to survive; if you starve yourself of essence, you will lose your desires, and your ability to distinguish what you want from what is just there. Eventually, you will fall into the dream, mistake shadow for reality, and forget who you are.

Abandoned Toys

If you choose not to feed from an object of desire, you may be able to remove your "bond" from it. But it's still there, it was still something once desired, touched by the real. Locking away abandoned objects in vaults (or distant shadows, same thing) for contingency should not work. Perhaps abandoning it and loosening the bond makes you unable to find it anymore – you stumble about in shadow, even if you find the exact same world where you locked it in a vault, it's not there anymore, because it became something you didn't desire. The true object of desire slips away, is displaced, goes astray. It's a metaphysical law.

And once lost, the thing can turn against you...

Shared Toys

If you want to claim as an object of your desire something already claimed by another, you can do so by giving it another (fourth) quality. You'd also need to interact with it for a scene (just as

you would when you create a new object). An object desired by more than one can produce one more point of essence per day.

If an object of desire is claimed by a third brother as well, it will become truly real. See below, under "Awaken".

Awareness

You can recognize your brothers' toys; you can identify that a person, place or thing is an Object of Desire. You can not say whom it belongs to (for this we have powers).

Throwaway Toys

If you were locked in a cell, you could say you desire a key; if you were marooned in the desert, you could say you desire water. I as game designer want to avoid such throwaway and discardable Objects of Desire.

So, you can satisfy a transient need by mucking about with reality; subtle manipulations of the shadowwalking ability can usually solve any petty, immediate need you have, if you are willing to put up with some inconvenience and difficulties. Generally, if you don't need or want something after you get it, it's not an object of desire – it's there for a single scene and gone. The GM and the other players can and should veto any lame attempt to define something silly as an object of desire.

Awaken

An Object of Desire can become so real that it bridges the gap from plaything or pawn to a Truly Real thing. When this happens, it can no longer be fed upon.

A place that becomes truly real becomes part of the one real world; it may vanish from its current shadow and appear in the "root reality". It can no longer be destroyed casually.

An object that becomes truly real can no longer be destroyed casually. It retains its qualities.

A person that becomes truly real awakens his/her divine spark or is "embraced into reality". Such a person is a PC or brother, no longer an Object of Desire. To feed the inner spark, this awakened person must consume 1 essence a day from his/her own Objects of Desire.

An Object of Desire may become truly real either accidentally or as a result of deliberate action. To deliberately make an object of desire truly real, feed it essence: if it has been fed essence equal to the sum of all its qualities, it will awake/become real.

An example of accidental "awakening" is **The Rule of Three**: if an Object is desired by 3 different people, it becomes truly real after the 3rd person's scene.

Hitting Things And Other Ways Of Resolving Differences

It's like Amber Diceless here: you compare ability levels, highest level wins; except that here you can boost your abilities with Essence. Also, as a sort of guideline to GM fiat, the relative difference in ability level determines how much you win by, or how severe the consequences are to the loser.

Edge – difference between high and low abilities, expressed as a % of the low ability:

Less than 50% - minor setback; defeat, but loser can retreat or shift strategy. The loser's player narrates the defeat.

Over 50% - considerable setback; crushing defeat; loser is in a bind, has losses, retreats at great cost. The winner's player narrates.

Double and higher – total defeat; loser suffers heavy losses and capture; the winner's player narrates.

How do you pick what ability/quality is most appropriate? Usually it's the call of whoever initiates the conflict, and depends on the situation framed by the GM/players.

If you can work an opponent's scar into the conflict, it is subtracted from their relative rating. Kick them where it hurts.

If you have an Object of Desire or something real at hand that has a quality you think can be useful for the current conflict, you may use that object's quality instead of yours, if it is higher. IF you have something with a relevant quality that is equal to yours, and which could conceivably enhance your own ability, and the rating is at least 2, you gain a +1 to your effective rating.

So, magic sword 2 could make swordsman 2 a match for swordsman 3. Someone less skilled could substitute this magic sword 2 for his warrior 1; swordsman 3 would need a mightier magic sword to be any more amazing than he is now. Magic sword 1 could only help you if you had no relevant combat ability.

Creating Characters

Characters are player's sock-puppets; I want you to create your character by first defining his/her Objects of Desire. Tell me what you want, and you tell me who you are.

Your character is defined by rated qualities, just like an Object of Desire. That is because your character was once an Object of Desire herself.

The qualities are what sets you character apart from other characters, so they should be as rich and as unique as you can make them.

A character will also have a name, initials or a symbol (used to mark your character's objects of desire) and a sire: the person who originally made them his/her Object of Desire. Think what made that person want your character so much that he made you real. Tell me about your character and you tell me about your sire.

Characters start out with 6 points used to rate 3 or more qualities; a rating of 1 is average, 2 is remarkable, and 3 is exceptional. Characters can't have a rating above 4.

Characters can be given up to 2 scars, negative qualities with a rating of 1. For each scar, take an extra point to add to the rating of your qualities.

I was considering describing character attributes, abilities or (best name so far) domains, rated as high as the relevant quality. For example, a division like Physical, Mental and Social (Vampire tribute), or (my latest idea) War, Love and Art (maybe with Magic as a fourth). I love inventing attributes, but I'm not sure we really need them here.

Powers and Abilities

Cool Powerz:

Amber Diceless has Pattern, Logrus, Trump, Shapeshifting and some minor powers to represent magic (Power Words, Sorcery and Conjuraton). Vampire had Auspex, Obfuscate, Animalism, Protean, Thaumaturgy, Presence, Dominate and a bunch of ability-boosting powers, including Celerity, Potence and Fortitude (?).

There is a bunch of powers characters get "for free", or rather, that they power by spending Essence. Shadow-walking is one of these: you go into shadow and find what you want.

Core powers vs. Optional powers

Some powers are at the very core of what this game is about; other powers are really borrowed from Amber (Trumps, the more elaborate parts of Shadowwalking), others are just neat, inspired by vampire lore, action movies or whatever (shapeshifting, scrying, shades).

The "core" powers would be those that are available to everyone – boosting abilities, finding (and recognizing) objects of desire. You could probably run a game with very low-key superpowers using just these, using a more mundane interpretation of these powers.

Other powers add flavor, color and imbalance. Use them at your discretion to create the campaign you want – focused on Amber, Vampires or Superheroes.

Boosting Abilities

Spend 1 Essence to add 1 to any physical, social or mental ability (see above?).

Shadowwalking

The ability to move between worlds and the essence cost associated with it.

Slow, leisurely, provided you are walking towards either something Real or seeking an object of desire – free.

"Hellriding", trying to get somewhere *fast*, at a certain time (i.e, before a wedding) – 1 or more (see Adversity) Essence.

Worldshaping – trying to get to a particular environment, i.e, altering your surroundings to match your desires – 2 or more Essence. More if you want it fast.

Shades

Shades – you cast no shadow or reflection: your reflections are in reality, not light and shade. However, this makes you stand out. So, you may wish to bind a *shade*, which functions as your reflection and shadow. This demonic double can go rogue, get lost, be seduced by your enemies, etc. It can also serve you in many ways, because it is an independent entity that is mostly non-physical. It's the player's choice whether to pick up a shade or not.

The bit about only being about at night? That ties into the bit about having no shadow or reflection.

Because they have no shadow or reflection, Vamberites like portraits of themselves. A *Trump* is an image of something or someone you desire. It needs to be either a real person or an object of desire (Corwin cheated with the lighthouse trick).

Shapeshifting

It's a cool power.

Effects, rated by essence expenditure needed:

- 1 – Change appearance (still basically look human)
- 2 – Change into animals, basic human size and abilities
- 3 – Change into animals, with abilities – fly, swim, run fast, very small, huge size, venomous, etc.
- 4 – Transcend any human and animal ability – stretch, super-strength, shoveling, amazing speed, shadow-walking.

Drawing Trumps

You can only draw a trump image "from life"; it can only show someone or something or someplace Real, or an Object of Desire (yours or someone else's). You can reproduce an image fairly easily if you crafted it. You can't duplicate someone else's Trumps.

Duplicate an existing Trump that you drew (make a copy of a card or portrait) – 1 Essence.

Create a Trump image – 2 Essence.

Sketch a trump image *fast* – 3 Essence.

Using Trumps

I hate the "magic cellphone" aspect of trumps. Try to avoid that. Using a trump is a matter of establishing contact with the person at the other side, and then using social or mental dominance to get them to bring you across to where they are. With place and objects, it's easier, unless someone uses a power to block contact with them. A person can also refuse contact, and you wouldn't know why you couldn't contact them.

Optional idea, to avoid the cheapness: you need to perhaps do some blood shedding ritual and expend 1 Essence to make a Trump contact. So this really isn't something to be done lightly or casually.

Scrying

This is a general power of finding information. In *Amber Diceless* this is covered by certain aspects of Pattern and Logrus; in *Vampire: The Masquerade* it's called Auspex. I haven't been bothered to write its costs table.

Adversity

The universe hates you and tries to keep the things to desire from you. The representative of this in the game is the GM. Your brothers are also often hostile – the other players represent that.

When you pick a new Object of Desire, you have to overcome difficulties to possess it – this can manifest as winning a lover's heart or defeating a dragon to obtain a magic treasure. The difficulty is represented by an Adversity number which needs to be overcome in some attribute contest. The adversity rating is equal to the highest rated quality of the object of desire in question.

Adversity is a resource used to create conflict and therefore story. More than that, if I go GMless, it is used to force players to create challenge for other players. We can talk of an Adversity pool, which represents how much the universe is out to get a character. Think of this as representing Hubris (the more stuff you have – Objects of Desire, Essence – the more the universe is out to get you) or Karma – abuse the universe and it hits back.

Only PCs acquire adversity; only players (and the GM) use it.

Acquiring Adversity

- When you first initiate a new object of desire, you acquire adversity equal to its highest ranked quality.
- When you bond to an existing object of desire, you acquire a point of adversity.
- When you have 4 or more points of Essence on hand, you acquire a point of adversity.
- When you enact a harrowing, you acquire a point of adversity.
- When you kill an object of desire or someone real, you acquire two points of adversity.
- When you perform a great deed, enact a grand scheme, or otherwise earn the appreciation of the other players, you get 1-3 points of adversity.
- In general, if we feel that Adversity isn't accumulating fast enough, we should do something about it. But don't overdo it.

Adversity acquired sits in the character's pot until someone channels it somewhere, removing the channeled points from the pot.

Channeling Adversity

Each time a player's character has a scene, the GM and the other players can allocate any number of points of adversity in that character's "pot" as they see fit. GM goes first (or last) and has veto call. Points of adversity assigned are removed from the character's pot.

Between two scenes centered on a player character, the player can pass one point of his character's adversity to another player that has a character in the current scene. This point must be channeled and discarded in that scene. This lets you reduce your problems while causing problems for your

Some things you can do with adversity:

- Direct **obstacle**: assign points of adversity to provide direct opposition to the character in some conflict. For example, say an army attacks him, and has a quality of called "deadly military force", which you assign a rating of 4 by removing 4 adversity points from the player's pot.

- Add **complications** to one of that characters' object of desire. A complication is written on the inverse side of the card or note that describes the object of desire. A complication is something about the object that is less obvious than a quality or a scar, and which will reveal itself as troublesome at a later time. Complications might be related to an object's personality or its history, afflictions like curses, hidden booby traps or unidentified diseases, etc. Complications can many times involve a relationship between the Object of Desire and some third party that could pose a threat, someone real like a PC or his sire. The complication of an object of desire having a past history with someone else is justified by the metaphysical fact that the universe is lazy, and likes to recycle things which already exist instead of forming something new. A single point of adversity is removed for each complication added. A complication can be given a higher rating by using up a number of points of adversity equal to the rating, to underline it's magnitude.
- Initiate or boost a **nemesis**: A nemesis is a potential enemy, a NPC brother or other real person that either bears a serious grudge against the character or is otherwise at cross purposes. You can initiate a nemesis with a single point of adversity; if he shows up in the scene, he or she will be about equal to a starting player character. With an additional point, you can give the nemesis some advantage – a useful object of power, allies, resources, 2 points of unused essence, etc. For two points, you can increase one of his qualities, or give him an even bigger advantage. You can involve an existing nemesis in a scene (featuring any character) if it seems appropriate without channeling adversity, unless you want to give the nemesis some advantage. When a new nemesis is initiated, a player (or the GM) doesn't have to assign all his or her qualities. Assign only those qualities that come into play, so that when next the nemesis turns up, others can fill in more of his or her attributes. Write down the nemesis' details in the usual manner.

Spent Adversity

All adversity that is channeled from a character's pot goes into a "discard" pool. At the end of the session, count the points discarded, and use these to figure out experience points and advancement. I'll hash this out once I hash out powers and the abilities of elders.

Design Notes

This game's design is informed both by my personal and gaming life. On a personal level, I am by nature a terribly passive person, to the point of phlegmatic apathy. When asked to define my goals in life, my wants and wishes, I find myself feeling extremely uncomfortable. When given the chance, I'd prefer to defer to the will of others. I get into relationships where I nullify my self, my opinions, and my desires. I live my life in such a way as to avoid any decisions or choices. When pushed into action, I freeze, paralyzed by fear and doubt.

This is why a game where the players have to constantly decide what their characters really want and go out and get it appeals to me, as escapist fantasy and perhaps as transformative wish fulfillment.

Now, as a gamer, I prefer to GM. Both because this gives me great control over the creative "space", and because it relieves me of any decision making: I'm just there to entertain and interest the players, who have to make all those hard choices.