# Bleed and How to Deal With It

## Introduction

Experiencing different emotions is one of the great joys of fiction. We laugh at a comedy movie, thrill at the exploits of a comic book superhero, and feel our hearts beat faster as we read the intimate exploits involved in a novel of vampire romance. In books, movies and comics, the mechanism that lets us access the emotions of fictional characters is empathy. We are able to empathize with the emotions of others, understand them, and feel through them.

When you're playing a roleplaying game such as *Vampire: The Masquerade*, where you portray a specific character, there's a phenomenon at play called bleed. Used in this context, the word bleed refers to the way the emotions felt by your fictional character may carry over to you as a player, or the reverse where your characters start to exhibit feelings that you are experiencing.

This use of the word bleed was coined by the game designer Emily Care Boss, defining it as:

*"The overlap between player and character emotions. May be positive, negative or otherwise."*

This article explains what bleed is, how it works, and how you can deal with it. The goal is that understanding the phenomenon helps you communicate about it with other players, help identify problems as they may arise, and calibrate your own play experiences so that you get what you want out of the game.

This article is intended to help players and Storytellers who are playing the tabletop roleplaying game *Vampire: The Masquerade*. It can also be helpful with other World of Darkness games such as *Hunter: The Reckoning* and *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*. Some of its concepts may also be applicable to *Vampire* LARP.

This article also builds on Appendix III of the roleplaying game *Vampire: The Masquerade*, Advice for Considerate Play, and we strongly recommend all players and Storytellers to read it first. The Appendix explains the basics of how to play while taking care of both yourself and your co-players. It describes tools

such as Lines and Veils, Fade to Black, The Stoplight System, The X Card, The OK Check In and The Door is Always Open which are recommended for everyone who plays *Vampire*.

Familiarizing yourself with these tools is a great first step in making sure you're able to share good roleplay experiences with your troupe. They help you take care of both yourself and your co-players.

## What to Expect

This article consists of five section:

- **What is bleed?** This section describes bleed as a phenomenon and gives examples of what it may look like.
- **How does it feel?** This section expands on what bleed may feel like when you experience it or look like when someone else is experiencing it.
- **Managing bleed outside an active session:** This section provides tools for how to manage bleed beyond what happens during an active gaming session.
- **Managing bleed at the table:** This section provides tools for how to manage bleed at the table, making sure that you have the experience you want to have.
- **Resources:** The ideas in this article have been developed by a lot of different people analyzing how roleplaying works and what kind of calibration tools can be used to improve it. This section seeks to provide links to some of the sources you can check if you want to read more.

## What is Bleed?

Bleed is a phenomenon where character emotion affects player emotion and vice versa. It happens quite commonly at roleplaying tables, even when we're not aware of it. Most people who have played roleplaying games have probably experienced it at least to a mild degree, and for many it contributes to the general enjoyment of roleplaying. It's fun to feel scared by the Storyteller's descriptions, or thrill to the triumphs of your character.

By itself, bleed is not a good or a bad thing. It's a

neutral phenomenon that can affect us in different ways depending on the situation. Like many things in life, it may cause trouble when it gets out of hand, but can be enjoyable in moderation.

Consider your own experiences with roleplaying games. Have you felt bleed, i.e. have you felt emotions that originated from the fictional circumstances of your character, or have you made your character act a certain way because of the emotions you were feeling as a player?

■ If your experience of bleed was negative or made you feel bad, were you able to resolve those emotions satisfactorily?

■ Have you ever experienced something akin to bleed with other types of character-based games, like LARP or video games?

You may wish to return to these questions after we go through a series of examples of what bleed may look like.

### UTILITY

The utility of a term like *bleed* is that it describes a specific way in which roleplaying games affect you and your emotions. Because there's a word for it, it's easier for you to understand, conceptualize and discuss what you're feeling.

Let's say that your character has a love interest who dies tragically. You feel sad. As a player, the concept of bleed helps you understand what's going on and why you feel this way. You're empathizing with the specific situation of your character through the mechanism of bleed and thus, experience an emotion.

Often, understanding the emotions you're having helps to process them in a constructive, positive way. Knowing why you feel sad helps you find a way forward emotionally. Understanding the way bleed can also lead to unwanted emotions helps navigate, process and ultimately avoid them.

On a more positive note, you can also leverage your understanding of bleed to purposefully seek out emotional experiences that you enjoy, making the game more fun and interesting.

### HOW DOES IT FEEL?

Here are a few examples of bleed:

■ **Succeeding at a task:** Your character, a courier, attempts a difficult driving maneuver. You roll the

dice and succeed extraordinarily well. Not only does this make your character look good, it reinforces the character concept. You let out a loud "yes!" and jump happily at the table.

■ **Getting snubbed:** The Prince casually snubs your character at the Elysium. Your character feels annoyed, and so do you.

■ **The thrill of anticipation:** You've been hunting for a rebellious ghoul for the whole session. You've finally located them but just as you're about to bust in the door, you hear voices from inside. It's the leader of a rival Anarch gang. As the player and the character both, you feel the thrill of anticipation and perhaps a bit of anxiety. What's going to happen?

■ **You had a bad day:** You had a difficult day at work and you feel stressed. When you start to play, you don't interact as much as usual, making your character act more passive. As you relax into the game, your stress fades, and your character becomes their usual self.

■ **Feeling great:** In real life, you've just started a new romantic relationship and feel excited and full of love. In the game, your character comes across as optimistic and happy.

The fictional emotions of your character and the actual emotions you have as a person may sometimes become intermingled in these subtle ways. This kind of bleed is so commonplace and unremarkable that we rarely feel the need for special terminology to pick it apart.

### STRONGER EMOTIONS

Playing roleplaying games can involve strong emotions. They often happen through bleed. Sometimes these emotions are powerful, interesting and meaningful, a key part of why we roleplay. But they can also be too much, unwanted and difficult to process.

Because of this, it's useful to have techniques for both purposefully increasing bleed and dampening it down. This way, you can best control your own experience. These techniques are described later in this article.

Here are examples of powerful emotions related to bleed:

■ **Constant failure:** You have extraordinarily bad luck with tests and keep failing every dice roll, with bestial failures aplenty. As a result, during the session

your character is embarrassingly unsuccessful at everything. After a time, the game doesn't feel fun anymore because the feeling of being a failure bleeds between you and your character.

In this situation, bleed can also go the other way: You fail repeated dice rolls and feel sad because of it. This feeling of being inadequate translates to your character, although in their world these dice rolls are obviously not happening.

■ **Important accomplishment:** Through many long sessions of carefully planned effort, your character finally achieves their goal. Their enemies are vanquished, their allies stand tall and their vision for the domain has been fulfilled. The character feels a powerful sense of accomplishment and so do you as a player. You feel like you made a difference.

■ **Unrequited crush:** You play a convention one-shot involving a Storyteller character your Kindred is attracted to. You feel butterflies in your stomach when they talk, and hope for a romance to unfold. However, the character does not reciprocate your feelings. Although this happens in the specific context of a roleplaying game, it can feel bad the same way as any other unrequited crush.

■ **Enjoyable flirting:** In a game involving vampire romance where you have carefully laid out the boundaries of play and discussed what's okay with each participant, you have fun flirting with another players' character. You both enjoy it as part of the game and the story of your characters. It makes you feel good about yourself in real life, although the flirting remains inside the fiction.

■ **Character destroyed:** You've grown to like the character you play in a chronicle when they're suddenly destroyed because of an arbitrary dice roll. In some games this is no big deal, but when you identify closely with your character, their destruction can make you feel real grief.

When it comes to emotion, our brains don't really distinguish which emotions are about fictional events and which are about our real lives. Sometimes a fictional event such as a character death can make us feel real grief that's difficult to process.

This is also a good example of why emotions related to bleed should not be stigmatized and instead require understanding. Grief and all other bleed-related emotions need to be processed the same as any other emotion we might feel.

Grief over a character's death can even be a collective experience. Perhaps everyone in the troupe was really attached to that character and when they died, it's not just that character's player who feels the loss.

### FEELING GOOD ABOUT FEELING BAD

Sometimes it's interesting to seek out more melancholy emotional experiences in roleplaying games. This is not so strange when you consider other media. We watch tragedies in the theater and cry at the movies. In roleplaying games, such feelings are just more personal when they happen through the mechanism of bleed.

Here are a few examples:

■ **Your character is forced to betray their childe:** You feel guilty and sad as you play through the scene, but you also feel that the drama makes the experience interesting and satisfying.

■ **Your character is convicted for a crime they didn't commit:** You're shocked that the Prince could be so treacherous. Why didn't any of your allies speak up? Yet you're already anticipating the interesting story developments that are going to follow.

■ **Your character breaks up with another player's character:** You're drawing it out and it feels awkward and ugly. Although it's emotionally heavy to play, it's also interesting and feels like a meaningful roleplay experience.

In all these cases, it's not the emotional tenor of the scene that matters but how the players feel about it. If the players are happy to delve deep into the most awkward, embarrassing tragedy imaginable, there's nothing wrong with it. Different emotions are only a problem if someone present doesn't want to experience them at such depth. Seeking an interesting kind of discomfort or catharsis in play is fine as long as everyone in the troupe is on the same page.

It should also be noted that sometimes the emotions can be positive but nevertheless undesirable. For example, a player may feel a strong attraction to another character to the degree that it becomes uncomfortable. In such cases, positive emotions resulting from bleed should also be dampened using the tools later in this article.

### BLEED IN OTHERS

Playing roleplaying games as a troupe is a communal experience. As you play, you may notice that it's not only you but also your co-players who experience bleed. It's helpful to understand the phenomena which affect everyone in the game because it makes it easier to grasp what's happening and why. This way, you can all do a better job of making the game work for each other in an atmosphere of trust and collaboration.

Here are a few examples of what bleed in others may look like:

- **A quiet co-player:** You notice that another player is unusually quiet. You realize that they just played an emotionally difficult scene involving their character's sire. You figure that they probably need a bit of time to process it and decide to bring up other matters to give them space.

- **An amorous character:** You notice that the character of another player has started flirting with Storyteller characters inside the game much more than before. You realize that the player recently broke up with their partner and may be feeling lonely, with those emotions affecting how they play their character.

- **A strenuous objection**: As your characters plan their next moves, another player's character makes an unusually impassioned moral objection somewhat out of line with how that character has been portrayed in the past. Thinking about it, you realize your plans were moving in the direction of a boundary that player had set during session zero. You may ask the co-player directly whether they would prefer to move the play into another direction given their stated boundary. Alternatively, you may use your character to steer the discussion into another direction.

Your co-players are probably experiencing bleed the same as you are. If everything happens within the agreed-upon boundaries and everyone participating feels comfortable, it's all good. It only becomes a problem if boundaries and preferences are mismatched.

For example, some players specifically enjoy strong emotions when they roleplay. They may seek out dramatic, emotionally fraught play and make it purposefully as intense as possible. When such players are paired with a more casual troupe unwilling to go to such emotional lengths, problems ensue.

With this, as with many other matters, clear communication during session zero (see *Vampire* and the chapter Character Creation) is helpful.

### POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

Emotions can create challenges at the table, just like in everyday life. Like with emotional issues in other spheres of life, left unattended they can become quite serious even if the context is entirely fictional.

Here are a couple of examples of problems which may happen:

- **My emotions are more important than your boundaries:** A player feels so strongly during the game that they feel these emotions trump the boundaries others have expressed. For example, while another player has said that they don't wish to play on romance, the problem player keeps pushing them into that direction because they're in the throes of in-game emotion that keeps bleeding over.

- **The pick-up artist:** A player purposefully uses the game and bleed to try to hit on people for the purposes of out-of-game manipulation. The game provides an alibi to innocuously flirt with the goal of getting closer to another player on an out-of-game level. When this happens, bleed becomes the vehicle for emotional manipulation nobody consented to.

- **Mixing in- and out-of-game:** A player turns out to be unable to keep in-game and out-of-game separate. They interpret comments made in-character as real, getting insulted by game events and assuming that the relationships between the characters reflect the relationships between the players.

- **Using the game as alibi for abuse:** A player accuses others of being unable to keep in-game and out-of-game separate to cover for abusive behavior. For example, the player constantly infringes on the boundaries of others and then says: "It's just the game."

Note that this is different from a player who plays an abrasive character with the consent of the troupe and all participants.

Sometimes these issues arise because a player is playing bad faith, with motives other than simply having

a good game with friends. In other cases, they happen because a player's ability to emotionally regulate themselves is not up to the task. Regardless of how purposeful such acts are, they stop the game from working for everybody else.

Dealing with issues like these may be difficult, especially in a long-running chronicle. Ironically, while playing with strangers makes it more likely to encounter problem players, it's also easier to walk away.

The Storyteller should typically take the lead in solving social problems like these but it should be kept in mind that in some unfortunate circumstances, the problem player is the Storyteller.

## Managing Bleed Outside a Session

*In-game emotions should not affect out-of-game emotions. Your character is separate from you as a player.*

On the face of it, this is an obvious statement, and indeed a principle that makes roleplaying possible. When your vampire character drinks blood, that's a fictional persona you direct, not an expression of your values and principles as a human being.

Bleed obviously presents a challenge to this idea since it involves emotions and their transference between players and characters. The trick is to try to hold onto the separation of fiction and reality while also at the same time accepting that we really are feeling these feelings.

For example, you're playing a meek Nosferatu in a game of *Vampire*. Your character gets yelled at by another player's character, a Brujah. As you play this, the other player yells at you, portraying their character. This is all in-game. This is fiction. Nevertheless, being yelled at triggers a strong emotional response in you as a player.

To process this properly, you have to acknowledge that you really did just experience these emotions. Further, you have to ask the other player to not yell at you in the future but just verbally describe such actions in a normal tone of voice. To be able to do this, you have to be able to say that you felt bad as a player because of what happened in the game.

Perhaps the greatest utility of the idea that in-game emotions should remain in-game is as a personal guideline. If you feel angry at another player for something their character did, or if you have a crush on another player because of in-game events, you should identify

and resolve these emotions instead of just blindly taking them into life outside the game.

### PREPARING THE GAME

You can anticipate your needs in terms of managing bleed as you prepare for the game. You can also consciously work to deal with bleed between sessions and after the game is over. Some of the fundamental tools you use to manage bleed have been detailed in *Vampire: The Masquerade*. These include a session zero (see the chapter Character Creation), a planning session you have before the start of a new chronicle, and Debriefing (see Appendix III).

You can increase bleed on purpose. If you and your troupe enjoy playing strong emotions and you feel equipped to handle it, you can make specific choices that strengthen the emotional impact of the game. Note that you can make these choices individually as a player or, after discussing them during a session zero, collectively as a troupe. These choices tend to be the opposite of what you should do if you want to decrease bleed.

Before we go any deeper into this, there are several choices you can make at character creation to leverage bleed to experience simple, positive feelings:

- **Make your character good at the things required of them in the game:** This is an extremely simple choice you can make to regularly experience good feelings stemming from bleed. If the game is about intrigue, put some dots into Manipulation and Subterfuge. If it's about combat, make sure your character has physical Disciplines or skills like Brawl and Melee. This may feel obvious, but it works to give you the thrill of success.
- **Give your character personality traits that help them enjoy what happens in the game:** If the chronicle is about unearthing ancient lore and discovering the truth about the crimes of the elders, make a character who really enjoys poring over musty archives. Then when the archives come up in play, you may enjoy a bit of positive bleed as your character gets down to business.
- **Know what you like:** If you want to feel like a badass, make a character who's a badass (and perhaps you can ask your fellow players to play you up too!). If you like the thrill of excitement and fear,

make a character who's not jaded but instead reacts like an ordinary person would.

There are several things you can try to achieve during the planning stages of the game to make it easier for everyone to manage bleed and foster a good play culture:

■ **Play with friends you can trust:** Trust makes everything easier. For example, you're playing a romance with another player's character. You enjoy exploring the complexities of a vampiric love story, from the rush of an initial crush to the tragedies inherent in any relationship between the undead.

■ **Foster a positive play culture:** Bleed doesn't happen in isolation. It's part of the broader emotional landscape of your roleplaying sessions. If your play culture is positive, so that each player encourages others, thrills at their successes and laments their tragedies, it's easier to process bleed-induced emotions. Note that in horror roleplaying games, a positive play culture is especially important as it generates the trust that helps us explore deeper themes of horror.

Of course, we don't always play with our friends. Sometimes we play at conventions or other venues where we may meet our co-players at the start of the game. In such circumstances, dampening down on bleed is advisable. One possible method to increase or decrease bleed at character creation is this:

■ **Relatability**: How much do you relate to your character? If your character is very relatable, the chances of bleed are higher. If the character feels remote, abstract or unsympathetic, bleed is a lot less likely.

### WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

What do you do when things go wrong? You experience emotions through bleed that make you feel uncomfortable and which may cause problems. How do you get back on an even keel?

Dealing with the emotions that come from bleed works much the same as dealing with any other emotions you may experience. The added complication is that often, feelings that come from bleed don't really make sense in the context of your life.

For example, something that happened to your character made you extremely angry. Yet you realize that this anger is pointless and damaging and has no useful purpose or target. What do you do to get rid of it?

Here are a few tips on how to manage your emotions during the game:

■ **Process, don't suppress:** This is the starting point of emotional regulation. If you're having emotions, you shouldn't pretend to yourself that you're not. Accepting that these emotions are happening helps process them in a constructive way. Sometimes we have strong emotions about supposedly light or frivolous things like the games we play for fun. That doesn't mean those emotions shouldn't be taken seriously.

■ **Take some time:** Before you react, consider whether you should take some time to yourself. During a game, you can go outside for a bit. After a game, you can read a book, play a videogame or otherwise put some distance between you and whatever caused these emotions.

In particular, it's a good idea to take some time to yourself before saying something rash to your friends or co-players and particularly before you'd post something emotional on social media. It's possible you'd end up saying something that you later regret. In contrast, if you feel that after you've cooled down, you have identified issues that do need to be discussed, it does make sense to talk to others.

■ **Normalize relations:** Your emotions may be tied to something that happened in the game so that you see your co-players through the lens of the fiction. You can ask the troupe to take a break and discuss issues unrelated to the game so that you can get a sense of your co-players as their real, out-of-game selves. You can also do this proactively if you feel that someone else is having a bad time because of something you did in the game. You can ask how they feel outside the framework of the game and perhaps apologize for making them feel bad. This way, you also help them see you as yourself, not your character.

■ **Talk with an outsider:** Sometimes it helps to talk with someone who has nothing to do with the game. If they understand how roleplaying games work, they can help you get a sense of whether you're overreacting or not. They can help you calm down, or alternatively assist in finding the right way to bring

an actual problem to the rest of the troupe. Some issues may be more comfortably discusses with an outsider rather than a member of the troupe. For example, if you're struggling with unwanted sexual attraction to a co-player, it may be better for everyone if you resolve those emotions with the help of a friend rather than making it a topic of conversation during the game. Sometimes the person you need to talk to is your therapist.

■ **Talk with the Storyteller:** The Storyteller usually holds a position of social leadership in roleplaying troupes. You can talk about how you feel with them and perhaps they can help you by adjusting the game so that you have an easier time dealing with your emotions. For example, if you found interactions with a specific Storyteller character to be unbearable, that character can have a reduced role in the chronicle.

But then again, who do you talk to when you're the Storyteller? Sometimes the Storyteller finds themselves in an unenviable position, unable to open up to the troupe because of their position of social leadership. In such cases, the Storyteller may choose to talk to an outsider or perhaps ask a single player, possibly one they know well, to talk about the problem in private.

Of course, often it is entirely possible for the Storyteller to take their problems to the troupe and indeed it's sometimes helpful if they do so. When players see the Storyteller setting boundaries, it's easier for them to follow suit and set their own boundaries in turn.

■ **Detach:** If the game makes you feel bad, you can always detach from the game. This can take many different forms. At the mildest, maybe you just ask to skip the next session in the chronicle to get a bit of time to think. At the other end of the spectrum, you may choose to leave the troupe and decide that *Vampire* is not the roleplaying game for you. Only you know what works best for your needs.

## Managing Bleed At the Table

Often, bleed occurs most acutely during the game. Something happens and you have feelings about it. This section of the article is about how to affect the level of bleed as you participate in a game. You may wish to do so for different reasons and the tools here can go either way, increasing or decreasing bleed as needed.

■ **First person or third person:** The closer your character feels to you, the more you experience bleed. You can increase or decrease bleed by the simple expedient of speaking in the first person or the third person. If you want to feel more, you can say: "I talk to the Prince." If less, you can say: "My character, Stacy, talks to the Prince." You can also create distance from your character by narrating events in a more abstract fashion or by reducing social interactions to die rolls.

■ **Know your limits:** There may be a general topic that you know is emotionally difficult for you. If you know that you have difficulties keeping romantic feelings invoked in a game contained, you should be very careful about playing romance. Real life is always more important than a game, real players more important than the fiction. When you maintain your boundaries, both in terms of your own choices in the game and by using mechanisms such as the X card and Lines and Veils (see Appendix III in *Vampire*), you help keep the game functional for everybody, not just yourself.

■ **Listen to your gut**: If you feel that some aspect of a game is bleeding over in a negative way, you should trust that feeling and actively try to mitigate the issue instead of waiting for it to go away. Often, your instincts identify a problem faster than your conscious mind. Sometimes you can just play away from the problem yourself. For example, if playing romance starts to feel bad, you can make a conscious choice to stop focusing on that aspect of the game. Other times, you may need to raise the issue with your troupe and tell them that you have a problem. If you're playing with a good troupe, they'll listen, support you and adjust the game accordingly.

■ **Check-in:** If you suspect that a co-player is having difficulties with the game, whether because of bleed or some other issue, you can check in on them. Ideally, you should discuss this during session zero so that it can become normalized as part of your play culture. When you check in, you can simply ask: "Are you okay?". *Vampire*'s Appendix III discusses the technique of The OK Check-In which is designed to make this as easy as possible.

■ **Stop the game:** Sometimes if you feel the issue is

serious, it's a good idea to stop the game and take a break. If you're playing with a good troupe, none of the people around you want you to have a bad time. If you're not feeling okay, you can bring it up and see if the troupe and the Storyteller can adjust the play so that the game works for you.

Unfortunately, sometimes unwanted bleed creeps up on you. You didn't realize the emotions involved in play would be so strong and now it's too late to stop them. That's something that has happened to a lot of roleplayers, whether experienced or just starting. The key is to find ways to manage those emotions. To read how, look at the section When Things Go Wrong above.

There's a simple technique you can use to leverage bleed for the benefit of a co-player:

■ **Play to lift:** During play, make note of the different qualities of a co-player's character and do your best to lift them up. Typically, bleed will cause good feelings to transfer between player and character. For example, if another character is a suave fixer, you can marvel at how cool they are when they strut through the streets. Ignore their failures, play up their victories and validate their character concept.

### AFTERCARE

One of the best ways to manage bleed and the emotional health of the games you play in more generally is aftercare. This is discussed in *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s Appendix III under Debriefing. This means taking a moment after each session to debrief and decompress. This has several functions:

■ **Re-establish a social and emotional baseline out of the fiction:** Your co-players are people just like you, and your relationships with them are those established in real life. This reaffirms the categories of game and life as separate things.

■ **Let all participants process the experience together:** You experienced a game together. Maybe things got emotional. It's good to talk about that as a troupe!

■ **Deal with problems that came up in play:** Sometimes a problem is not acute but something that can be discussed between sessions. For example, a player may feel that a certain relationship is going in a bad direction. This is the moment to bring those issues up and talk about how you can make things good.

Sometimes an unstructured post-game discussion is enough. However, they can also benefit from a bit of planning. You can do a round, asking each player in turn questions like:

■ **How are you feeling?**
■ **What didn't work for you in the game?**
■ **What worked for you in the game?**

A single round is often enough to spark a more general discussion, but you can ask more questions if you feel like it. Unless there are specific problems to discuss, it's usually best to end on a positive question.

If you want more structure, you can use a method called Stars and Wishes, developed by Lu Quade from an earlier method called Roses and Thorns. Using this method, each participant first points to Stars. These are various elements they enjoyed during the session, whether details, people or incidents.

After this feel-good round, it's time for Wishes from each participant. They should be constructive and concern something that the participant wants for the future. These can be related to the content of the game, the play culture or anything else. You can ask for different types of things, from: "The Prince was so cool! I'd like to see more of them!" to "I enjoy combat more than romance so it'd be cool if my assassin character had more chances to strut their stuff!".

If the game has been intense and emotionally complicated, different players may have different needs regarding aftercare. One might wish to have some time for themselves while another wishes to talk about things outside the game and normalize relations. A third might need to discuss something specific that happened. This requires a bit of finesse from the Storyteller and it pays to listen to the players before deciding on the specific form aftercare takes.

The debrief is a good moment to talk about issues and problems that have come up during the game.

The Storyteller may wish to try to time the ending of the game so that there's space for a proper aftercare discussion if it feels like someone needs to address a problem with the game. Alternatively, a player may request this if it seems necessary.

For a lighter game with less emotional tension, you can use aftercare to make people feel good about themselves by doing a round of positive feedback. You can

take each player in turn and ask the others to say something positive about how they played: "Next, we'll take Elizabeth. What was great about how Elizabeth played today?".

You can end the round with the Storyteller, who also deserves some positive feedback.

### BLEED FOR STORYTELLERS

Bleed is typically discussed as an issue for players more than Storytellers. Perhaps because the Storyteller plays multiple characters, they're often less prone to experiencing bleed. They're more distanced from any individual character than a player is. Still, Storytellers may suffer unwanted bleed too and sometimes it's even harder to recognize because they might not be used to it. In such a situation, the Storyteller has the same right to use calibration mechanics and discuss the issue with the troupe as any player.

When you are the Storyteller, there are ways you can navigate the game's emotional landscape that make it easier for your players to enjoy the experience:

■ **Respect your players emotions**: *Vampire: The Masquerade* is a horror game and terrible things regularly happen in horror games. However, as the Storyteller you should respect the emotional investment players have, particularly in terms of their own characters. This doesn't mean that bad things can't happen to them. Rather, it means that you should avoid taking away things that matter to a players' character pointlessly or for cheap effect. If a player's character suffers a tragedy, it should have meaning and purpose. That way, the player may feel that they're experiencing a tragic story.

■ **Make things less emotional:** If you feel like there is a danger of unwelcome bleed in your game, for yourself or someone else, you can purposefully make the game less emotional. Just do the opposite of what you'd do if you wanted to make the game more emotionally engaging. Describe the actions of Storyteller characters more abstractly, focus on game mechanics and avoid scenes involving a lot of character emotion.

■ **Take a break:** If you feel that something is going wrong in the game, you can take a break and have a discussion with the players. You can ask a player directly how they're feeling, possibly one on one if that feels more considerate. You can do a round where you ask each player how the game is working for them and what they need. Depending on the circumstances, you may need the break to last a few minutes, end the whole session early, or put the chronicle on hold for a while.

Finally, if things really go wrong, you should stop the game. Players are more important than the game.

## Resources

You should make sure that you have a good handle on the calibration tools provided in *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Specifically, there's the entirety of Appendix III, Advice for Considerate Play which features many calibration tools as well as information on Debriefing. In addition to that, the Character Creation chapter also features a section on how to do a session zero.

*Vampire: The Masquerade — Players Guide* includes Considerate Play Guidelines (p. 216) which can also be useful. *Blood-Stained Love* has a section on considerate play from the specific vantage point of vampire romance, discussing some of the same themes as this article. It starts on p. 18. ■

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### ON BLEED

Check out the original definition by Emily Care Boss here: *https://www.blackgreengames.com/terms*
Sarah Lynne Bowman discusses bleed:
*https://nordiclarp.org/2015/03/02/bleed-the-spillover-between-player-and-character/*
Jonaya Kemper discusses playing for emancipatory bleed:
*https://nordiclarp.org/2017/06/21/the-battle-of-primrose-park-playing-for-emancipatory-bleed-in-fortune-felicity*
*https://nordiclarp.org/2020/05/18/wyrding-the-self*
*https://nordiclarp.org/2021/01/14/steering-for-survival*

### ON AFTERCARE

Leona Maple discusses postgame drop and aftercare: *apochromatic-unlimited.itch.io/apochromatic-unlimited-zine-issue-0* ■