



A guide to playing VTES

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And so we begin...

1. Playing to Win

As you will be aware, VTES counts victory by victory points. You get a victory point for ousting your prey, you get a victory point for being the last Methuselah standing and you get a victory point for Withdrawing.

Tournaments play with five players at the table. This is the number of players around which the game is balanced - less or more players will change the nature of the game, which we'll return to later, but let's presume the 5 player

standard for now.

For a 5 player game, each player can potentially get 5 VP - one for each oust, and one for surviving. What this implies is that 3 VP is the magic number. A clean sweep might be impressive, but your play should be aimed towards getting that magic 3 VP - you hit that, you've got a table win. Its unsporting to aim for anything less, as a player who isn't aiming for this is ruining the table dynamic and acting as kingmaker rather than contender.

3 VP can be achieved in various ways. The easiest way by far is to oust two players, and be the last man standing. A sufficiently aggressive deck might instead to aim for 3VP from ousts alone (with an expectation of being ousted). Certain trick decks might aim for 2 VP then a successful withdrawal, but this is an specialised approach as withdrawal is very hard to do.

To get that 3 VP you therefore need to do two things:

- 1) Oust your prey at least twice
- 2) Deny your predator the opportunity to oust you.

Everything you do should be with a view to one of these two goals.

2. Deck Building and Crypt Selection

Last time I played, tourney rules had a Library of 60-90 cards, and a Crypt of 12 or more cards. Almost always, you will be looking to have the maximum Library size (90 cards) and a Crypt of exactly 12 vampires. There are exceptions to this, which we will come to later, but for the new player this is a nice guideline to go by.

2.1 Master Cards

How many master cards to have in your 90 card library?

There is no hard and fast rule, but most players on average aim for about 20 master cards.

However, if your deck has a high *hand turnover* (that is, it plays minion cards at a high rate) you'll want to pare this down. In contrast, if you have a low *hand turnover* you'll want more master cards.

Trifles also mix this up a little, and generally if your master cards have a significant proportion of trifles you can afford to have more master cards.

Also, if you have cards that let you use up master phase actions on things other than playing master cards, then you'll want less master cards in your deck.

I'm personally wary of trifles, as they tend to have weak effects even if they cycle quickly, and can still clog up your hand.

Finally, if you have a route to a larger hand size or extra master phase actions, you can have more master cards, but if you have effects which are going to reduce your hand size (for example most *Events* cards) then you'll want less master cards again.

The common newbie traps are:

- 1) To have Master Phases unused.
- 2) To lack the Minion Cards they need when they need them, because of "hand jam".

This can happen to even the most experienced players, but if on the first few playtests you generally find that you are usefully using 80-90% of your master phases, you're probably on

target.

Note that this is just advice for the new player - advance players can mess around with decks that use master cards much more strongly, or even not at all.

So which master cards do you pick?

The first category is cards that help you oust your prey.

For a bleed deck, this might include such cards as *Pentex Subversion*.

The second category is cards that stop you being ousted.

This can be direct, with things like *Protected Resources*, or it could be locations that give permanent intercept, or cards that give you extra pool.

The third category is cards that strengthen your position on table.

For example, the "*Path*" cards tend to offset discipline costs. Other cards might accelerate you bringing out vampires, such as *Effective Management* or *Information highway*.

Several cards can fall into multiple categories, achieving multiple goals. No master Card fits every deck, ut a few are pretty damn common.

Consider:

- **Blood Doll** - This card lets you move pool to and from a vamp you control. The classic combo is Blood Doll with a Hunting Ground, which will effectively give you +1 pool a turn. Blood Doll is a great versatile card though as it can let you prop up an ailing vamp as well.
- **Minion Tap** - This card is faster than Blood Doll as it moves a chunk of pool at once. This can be preferable, as speed is advantage. A classic use of Minion Tap is to take almost all of a large vampire's blood back to your pool, then to either refill that vampire (for example with *Taste of Vitae* or *Voter Captivation*) or to sacrifice it (for example with *Golconda*). Lets look for example at the Minion Tap - Golconda combo. You bring out a heavy hitter with 10 or 11 capacity. You Minion Tap,

gaining 10 or 11 pool. The next turn you Golconda, gaining the same again. A 20-22 pool advantage wins games, trust me. The downside, of course, is that Minion Tap doesn't give you a permanent usable resource in play (as Blood Doll does) and that it leaves the targeted vampire quite weak.

- **Hunting Grounds** - If your crypt is at least 50% made of one clan, you should include that clan's hunting ground. Simple as that.
- **Information Highway** - A deck that plays this early is generally an aggressive one. Watch out also for *Zillah's Valley*, and other accelerators. Personally I include this card warily, as if you want to get it in the early game you'll generally need 6-7 copies, and that's a big commitment. With some luck though, this card can be a game winner.
- **Giants Blood** - It's hard to think of a reason not to include one copy of this card, so powerful is its effect. In the tourney metagame expect every deck to have a copy, and you'll want to play it as soon as you get it, even if the advantage is minimal. In more casual environments you can sometimes get away with holding onto it for maximum effect.
- **Direct Intervention** - Another power card, and one worth considering at all times. The question I always ask myself when including any Master Card is "*would a DI be a better use of the space?*" If the answer is yes, I don't include that card.
- **Clan-specific Powercards** - Certain clans have certain cards which are just downright awesome. Consider, for example the Tremere. They have *Arcane Library* which can be an influence accelerator or a pool generator, and *Chantry* which is a great way of winning a war of attrition. The number one Clan-powercard though has to be the Ventrue's *Hostile Takeover* - it'll either get you a vampire, or shift the balance of power in exciting ways. Be careful though with overcommitting to Clan powercards, as often the same slot will be better served filled with more simple functional cards.

- **Cards that support your Oust or Defence strategy** - These are perhaps my favourite sort of master card. Fame for a Rush deck, Pentex Subversion for Weenie Bleed, Secure Haven for mono-vampire decks... the list goes on.

A lot of newbies will blindly include a lot of *Master Discipline* cards. While solid master cards, you should always consider whether its worth using the slot up. After all, most well built crypts will have the disciplines you need already on the vampire. That's not to say Master Discipline cards don't have their place, but as with any Master Card always consider how they fit into your win strategy before including them.

2.2 Ousting The Prey

Always *always* ask yourself this question:

What is my Oust Strategy?

Every deck should have one, regardless of what else they are doing. You might be able to pull off a dozen of the coolest combos in the world, but if you're not ousting your prey, then you're not going to win.

How you oust your prey depends a lot on your deck archetype, but including some sort of oust strategy is *never* optional.

We'll come back to the deck archetypes, but the most common and classic oust strategies are as follows:

- 1) Bleed your prey successfully.
- 2) Use votes to remove your prey's pool.
- 3) Use combat plus supporting cards (e.g. *Fame* and *Dragonbound*)
- 4) Use specific cards that whittle off pool (e.g. *Army of Rats* or *Choir*)
- 5) Achieve complete board control.

Option one is the simplest, and each option following is increasingly complex.

2.3 Denying the Predator

Next, ask yourself this:

How can I stop my predator ousting me?

This is less important than ousting your prey, as surviving alone won't give victory. How much

resources you devote to this is a clear indicator of the aggression level of your deck.

Consider at one extreme Malkavaian *Sneaky-Bleed*. In its purest form this deck does nothing but launch large bleeds with stealth. It is aggressive as hell, and does nothing to stop its predator. The way it wins is to oust its prey, and thus gain another 6 pool as buffer, and get those 3 VP before it is itself ousted.

Consider at the other extreme a Tzimisce *Catch Deck*. This deck intercepts everything in sight, and is defensively one of the soundest decks in the game. In contrast it tends to be weak in attack, relying on *Army of Rats* to whittle down its prey. If this deck is your prey, you have permission to start crying...

Generally common defensive strategies include:

- 1) Block your predator's actions. ("catch")
- 2) Increase your pool. ("bloat")
- 3) Redirect attacks against your pool ("bounce")
- 4) Remove your predator's ability to attack you ("board control")

Additionally you can consider the strategies of manipulating your predator's hand, and playing the players with tabletalk.

2.4 Bleed

Bleeding remains the simplest and most resource-efficient way to oust your prey, and for that reason most decks include some bleeding.

A 1 point bleed, of course, doesn't take you very far to winning the game.

The big bleeds come from a combination of inherent bleed bonuses, action cards and action modifier cards. The classic *Inner Circle* decks, for example can often stack Govern The Unaligned (Bleed at +2) with Conditioning (+3 bleed) and their inherent bleed bonus (+2) for a staggering 8 points per hit. Add in other tricks, and this can go even higher.

Even better than one big bleed, of course, is several big bleeds. A dedicated bleed deck will often pull together three to four bleeds per turn, each of 4-8 points. That sort of damage can oust a player pretty damn quick.

An alternative strategy is to weenie-bleed (lots

of small minions bleeding for 1-3 pts each).

Many decks, of course, don't bleed quite so aggressively.

The downside to bleeding is that its quite easy to counter.

Because bleeding has no inherent stealth, the onus is on the bleeder to avoid being blocked. Because many "bounce" cards exist, its possible for a big bleed to end up on your prey's prey. Finally, because everyone fears the speed of aggressive-bleed decks, you can expect board-control players to focus on crippling your ability to act, even if they are sat cross-table.

2.5 Politics

Politics is subtler than bleeding, and generally looks at smaller pool damage, but it has many other advantages.

The key vote card that almost every vote deck will use is *Kine Resources Contested*, which lets you split 4 pool damage across two methuselahs. *Conservative Agitation* is a weaker alternative. The problem with KRC, of course, is that you are unavoidably going to antagonise a second Methuselah with the splash damage, unless you target yourself as the second methuselah. There are other damage cards as well, like *Parity Shift* which have pros and cons of their own.

Voting has a few troubles which need to be overcome:

First you need to not get voted down. You either need votes on table, or you need cards that give votes, or you need to be good at table talk.

Second, you need to avoid being blocked. Sure, you've got +1 stealth, but that advantage is counteracted by the fact that as an undirected action it can be blocked by methuselah's other than your prey (primarily the threat is your predator) and made tougher by the fact that few clans that are politically-strong have much in the way of stealth.

On the other hand, there are many advantages as well.

Voter Captivation is one of the most powerful

cards in the game - combined with Minion Tap it can give a vote deck an almost unassailable pool advantage.

Also, of course, there are vote cards that do stuff other than damage pool. It can be very tempting to include a lot of these, but always ask yourself if that card slot is better served with an extra copy of Kine Resources Contested. The versatility of votes though can allow for interesting and complex strategies, and by its nature the political deck is an excellent one for tabletalk experts.

2.6 Combat

There is a fairly tough concept for new players to wrap their heads arounds:

Winning combats doesn't win games.

At least, not on its own.

Look at it this way - torporing your prey's minions doesn't damage his pool, so you're no directly closer to victory. Beating your predators vampires doesn't protect your pool any more than just blocking or redirecting them does.

On the other hand, combat is the number one path to *board control*. Combat allows you to create an in game situation that facilitates victory, but it doesn't achieve victory in itself.

You *can* win with a pure combat deck, but it takes some tricks and subtlety. Contrary to intuition, combat decks actually demand more intelligence and subtlety from their players than almost any other deck type.

With regards to putting together a combat package in your deck, there are three approaches:

1) Combat Heavy

A combat heavy deck needs not only lots of combat cards, but also lots of means to get into combat. Classically there are two approaches to this:

Rush is when you use cards that allow you to enter combat with another minion. *Haven Uncovered*, *Bum's Rush*, *Ambush*, *Nose of the Hound* are all favourites. *Brujah* are the classic rush-clan, but other clans can do it too.

Catch is when you intercept actions, typically "catching" every action you can. Not all catch decks fight as well, but most do. *Tzimisce* are the classic catch-clans.

Also, a combat-heavy deck needs to step back and consider how it is actually going to win the game - that is, *ousting prey and denying the predator*. We'll come back to this.

2) Safety Package

A deck that doesn't want to do combat, but which wants to be survivable in combat, will often include a "safety package". The most common variant on this is including lots of cards which have the effect "*Strike: Combat Ends*" such as *Majesty* or *Earth meld*. These powerful effects can completely deny a combat deck.

This is so true, that most combat heavy decks recognise that "combat ends" is their foil, and will deliberately include cards that deny this strategy, such as *Immortal Grapple*, *Psyche* or *Dog Pack*.

An alternative defensive safety package would be to work instead with damage prevention, or dodges, or a combination of the above.

Another approach to the safety package is to include a few offensive cards to keep people at bay, or to offset the pain of combat. An example of this would be a Nosferatu deck splashing a few potency cards. The idea here is not to force combats yourself, but to have an option when fights happen.

Regardless, while the combat package of a combat heavy deck might make up 50-80 cards, a simple "safety package" is rarely more than 10-20 cards.

3) Ignore Combat...

...At your peril.

Some decks are so focused that they just close their eyes to combat and instead just seek to do what they do best. They figure if they're fast enough and aggressive enough then board control becomes an irrelevance.

The classic examples are pure sneaky bleed decks, and weenie-bleed/weenie-vote decks.

2.7 Stealth and Intercept

An easier idea:

Stealth facilitates other strategies, it is not a strategy in and of itself.

This should be obvious, but I've seen newbies play decks which are designed around the idea of being stealthy, but which have little use for all that stealth.

On the other hand, its a similar newbie-trap to have a deck that relies on a lot of actions, but not to have the stealth to support it. Consider for example most vote decks - political actions have an inherent +1 stealth, but if you have no other source of stealth, than a single permanent source of +1 intercept can completely ruin your game!

In contrast:

Intercept is a strategy in and of itself.

Why? Because blocking allows you to control the flow of the game, and to interfere with the actions of the other Methuselahs. Its beneficial, but not essential, to have some sort of strategy of what you want to do once you've blocked, but blocking is in and of itself a useful thing.

Many disciplines offer Intercept - *Auspex* and *Animalism* are amongst the best. Its also worth noting "*permanent intercept*" cards though - like *KRCG News Radio* (a Master Card Location that gives +1 Intercept when tapped) and *Sports Bike* (an Equipment Card that gives +1 Intercept to the minion).

+1 Intercept might not seem like much, but this splash of "light intercept" will provide you with a mass of new options - suddenly you can block hunts, block votes, block Dominate-only bleeds that are using the stealth from Bonding, block Equip actions, block Employ actions, block Rescue actions.

All in all +1 Intercept is a massive effect.

On the other hand, if you are trying to block a deck that uses *Heavy* stealth, and you have only *Light Intercept* then the best bet is not to bother. The rationale for this is that against heavy stealth you won't succeed in blocking anyway, and all you're doing is allowing the

player to exercise their deck and cycle stealth cards.

Its worth noting at this stage the idea of "*fake stealth*". These cards don't add stealth, but deny blocking in some other way. Examples include *Seduction*, and *Call of the Hungry Dead*.

3.0 Common Deck Archetypes

Ah, now this is the fun bit.

For each deck described I'll address the following points:

- 1) How does this deck win the game?
- 2) What cards should you use?
- 3) How do you play this deck, and how do you beat it?

I'll run through decks as they come to mind, but I'll try to start with the simplest types first.

3.1 Sneaky Bleed

- 1) How does this deck win the game?

A sneaky-bleed deck combines high stealth with high bleed values to oust its prey as quickly as possible.

- 2) What cards should you use?

In your crypt, you will need vampires that can both generate stealth and generate high bleeds. The classic choice is *Malkavians*, either using the old school Dominate-Obfuscate combo, or the newer Dementation-Obfuscate combination.

There are crypt variants however.

- * The Giovanni and a few other clans can combine Necromancy with Dominate, and compensate lighter stealth by adding fake stealth.
- * The Setites, and a few other vampires, have Obfuscate plus Presence, which while less directly damaging than Dominate compensates by allowing them easy access to *Combat Ends* cards and often lets you gain pool on successful bleeds. The main setback to Obfuscate/Presence is the low number of low to mid capacity vampires that combine both at Superior.
- * Inner Circle decks use a single big hitter (like Arika or Stanislava) and use their broad discipline suite and inherent bleed bonus to achieve HUGE bleeds. This is a different deck sort altogether of course, so we'll come back to this,

As a rule of thumb, most Sneak-Bleed decks will aim to either use the smallest capacity possible vampires that have the two active disciplines at superior, or use any that have

both disciplines at least at inferior (then include Master Discipline cards). Exceptions exist of course, and there's many ways to work crypt building. Almost always, you want to be building your crypt and library around just TWO disciplines, as the sheer aggression of a Sneaky Bleed deck demands a high level of focus.

The library should include a mix of stealth and bleed cards, plus optionally some other stuff.

Master Cards - The deck is fast cycling, so you'll need master cards you can play easily so they don't clog up your hand, and will likely want no more than 15-20 maximum. Consider *Master Discipline* cards to tighten your vamp's performance. Consider cards that make life hard for your prey to block (like *Misdirection*, *Pentex Subversion*). Consider startup speed (Information Highway, Zillah's Valley). Consider cards specialised to your deck type (Momentum's Edge, etc.). Also, don't forget the ever functional Blood Doll, Hunting Ground, etc. Finally, consider *Deal with the Devil* and *The Barrens* which will help keep your hand moving and make sure that you always have an aggressive hand to play.

Bleed Cards - On a bleed you can play just one action card, and usually only one Bleed modifier too, though Command the Beast breaks this rule. Thus you want a nice mix. The strongest options in a classic sneak bleed deck are Govern The Unaligned, and Conditioning. *Govern The Unaligned* is probably one of the strongest cards in the game - a gold standard of quality to which many other cards are often compared. It costs a blood, but can be used as a +2 bleed action, or to add 3 pool to a younger vampire, which in turn can be treated as an Influence accelerator or as a Pool Generator. *Conditioning* also costs a blood, for +2 or +3 bleed, and though a weaker card than *Govern The Unaligned* has the advantage of being an action modifier, so can be stacked on top of it. Don't forget that you only pay the cost of action cards if the action is successful, whereas modifiers must be paid for as they are played. That's not to say that these two cards are all you need - you CAN build a sneaky bleed deck with no other bleed cards, but most players like the versatility of having a few different options, like Threats, Bonding, Scouting Mission, etc.

Stealth Cards - Get a nice mix, as on each

action you can only play each once. Many Stealth Cards have "bonus effects", and you'll want to make the most of these to optimise effectiveness. Generally speaking, a Pure Sneak-Bleed will want maximum focus, so *Lost in Crowds* is always good, as is *Elder Impersonation*, as these two are very effective for bypassing blockers.

Other Stuff - Don't have any, or at most have 5-10 cards worth. Diluting the Sneaky-Bleed is generally a bad idea, though some players might consider it to be worthwhile if they have a particularly clever twist on the theme. Its not uncommon, for example, for Malkavian players to include *5 Wake With Evenings Freshness* plus *5 Deflections* in order to give some defence in a bleed heavy environment. Personally, I deplore dilution in *Sneaky Bleed* - you can't get 3 VP with Sneaky Bleed if you don't move fast, so don't risk drawing situational cards!

3) How do you play this deck, and how do you beat it?

Playing this deck is about aggression. From the outset you should bleed and bleed hard.

Sometimes you might be able to fake and hold back so as not to draw attention to yourself but generally you'll only get away with this if your deck doesn't have the appearances of a sneaky-bleed deck. A classic Malkavian deck is obviously going to sneaky bleed at some point, so you can't hide that - best just to be up front and start hitting hard from the start.

The deck is undeniably effective but has some significant weaknesses.

Firstly, its a rather obvious archetype. From your first bleed, or even from the revelation of your first vampire, most players will have cottoned onto your game plan. This leaves you little room for subtlety or negotiation.

Second, it runs little interference, instead focusing entirely on its own goals. This means that sneaky bleed tends to be weak at denying the predator, and very weak at board control.

Third, it is very vulnerable to combat. Most vampires who are good at sneaky bleed will be both bad at combat and bad at combat avoidance.

Fourth, it draws aggression. Everyone fears the speed and power of a sneaky bleed, so they will seek to contain it. At the same time, others know that whatever they do to you, your game plan remains the same (bleed forward, bleed fast). This means that you have little negotiating power. Note that Dementation as a choice over Dominate has an advantage here, as it exchanges sheer bleeding power for freedom to bleed in any direction, hence giving you a lot more negotiation power. As you may have gathered, a lot of people really have a grudge about *Sneaky Bleed* as it is an archetype that is all about brutish fast victory with no compromise and no real style. For this reason alone, I rarely play Sneaky Bleed in a casual environment.

Fifth, and perhaps most painfully, it is vulnerable to being "bounced". The cards *deflection, redirection, telepathic misdirection* are staples in many decks, and will completely screw your strategy as your big stealthy bleed is suddenly attacking the wrong target. Its easily possible for you to oust your prey's prey instead of your prey! One solution to this is to "bleed responsibly", for example using "Spying Mission" to reduce a redirected bleed to 0, or to agree to let your grandprey block you, and then exchange a 1-for-1 hit. The other solution is to bleed "very irresponsibility" and just hit your grandprey hard as well, hoping and counting on the fact that they'll be your prey soon anyway! The classic adage to Sneaky-Bleed is this: "If you're going to bleed irresponsibly, bleed *very* irresponsibly."

Other specific counterstrategies to Sneaky-Bleed exist, and any deck that wants to play a game of board control needs to consider them. For example, in a metagame where Sneaky-Bleed is common, *Protected Resources* can be a perfect foil, and *Archon Investigation* can wipe out a Sneaky-Bleed deck that relies on one or two big vampires. You won't always run into these cards though - it depends on the metagame.

Its worth mentioning that if you're on the receiving end of sneaky-bleed, and you don't have a counter-strategy, one risky way to survive is to simply decline to block and to suck up the pain. Essentially, by denying the sneaky-bleed player the chance to use stealth, then their hand clogs up with stealth cards, and they have a hard time drawing into no bleed cards. Doing this takes a lot of guts though, as for the

counter strategy to work you have to hold your nerve and be consistent in declining to block, taking the considerable pain in order to manipulate your predator's hand of cards - something you yourself can't see. It can go badly wrong, but against a heavy stealth deck, it can work.

3.2 Classic Vote

1) How does this deck win the game?

A classic vote deck uses pool-damage votes to remove its prey's pool, but also uses votes to gain pool, and to maintain board control.

2) What cards should you use?

In your crypt, you will generally vampires that either have votes, or have disciplines you want to use, or both. You also want to make sure that you have enough vampires to call the votes in the first place. The classic position is to use Princes, who have 2 votes a piece, and are generally low capacity enough that you can have two or three.

There are many many crypt variants however. A few examples:

* Weenie vote concentrates on vamps of all clan with capacity 1, 2 or 3, that also have *Presence*. It then relies on Crusades and Praxis Seizures to consolidate voting power, and presence cards to push through early votes.

The library should include the following:

Master Cards - Vote decks are generally slow cycling, so you can often have 20 or more master cards. Consider cards that make life hard for your prey to block your votes (*like Toreador Grand Ball, Opium Den*). Consider startup speed (*Information Highway, Zillah's Valley*). Consider cards that give extra votes (*Ventrue Headquarters, Legendary Vampire*) or which benefit voters (archetypes, etc.). As always, don't forget the ever functional Blood Doll, Hunting Ground, etc, but strongly consider substituting some of those Blood Dolls for *Minion Taps*. Finally, consider cards which remain in play but which need a successful referendum to remove, as they tend to be quite powerful and you will be in full control of how long they stay in play.

Referendum Cards - These are your staple cards, and almost every vote deck will include copies of *Kine Resources Contested* which is your number one way to deal damage. Its worth considering what vampires you have when you look at other referendum cards. For example, if you have a lot of high capacity vampires, then use lots of votes that benefit from this. There are many tempting "power" cards out there which are votes - *Protect Thine Own, Banishment, Dramatic Upheaval*. Consider them as board control options, but try not to overcommit card slots to them that could be used more functionally on good old fashioned pool-damage.

Vote Winning Cards - The Presence discipline complements vote decks because of *Awe* and *Bewitching Oration*, both of which help give you huge vote advantages. There are alternatives, of course, such as *Animal Magnetism*.

Vote Captivation - Voter Captivation is a game winning card, and a vote deck that combines it with a high capacity vampire plus minion taps can quickly gain an unassailable pool advantage. There are other cards which give you bonuses for successful referendums, but this one is the daddy.

Evasion Cards - You don't want to get blocked, so you need ways to avoid being blocked. Unfortunately, its very hard to get stealth in a politics deck, as the only vampires which combine *Presence* and *Obfuscate* tend to be without titles. There are options though, and almost every tourney-level politics deck will include some means of avoiding being blocked.

Combat Avoidance - Politics decks generally can't fight well without losing focus, so you need to put in a safety package to stop your precious titled vampires being torpored. The simplest version of this is a dozen *Strike: Combat Ends* cards, though this strategy can be countered by the specific strategies you find in most rush decks (i.e. Immortal Grapple and Psyche).

Bleed Defence - Politics decks don't tend to block well, so the best bleed defence for most votey clans is a small number of redirection cards, such as *Deflection* or *Telepathic Misdirection*. Bleed reduction cards (*Telepathic Counter*) can work too, but generally don't provide sufficient stopping power to make any

difference to a significant bleed.

3) How do you play this deck, and how do you beat it?

Vote decks are a midway house between board control and focused aggression. On the one hand, they are almost as good as bleed decks at damaging their preys pool. On the other, they have a much broader range of options available.

A vote deck *must* maintain awareness of the table dynamic, and a vote deck player must be skilled at tabletalk and dealmaking. Almost every vote card will affect more than one player, so you need to be aware of how to broker deals off every vote you call.

A vote deck can also be one of the game's fastest "bloaters" thanks to the card *Voter Captivation*, and combining it with *Blood Doll* or *Minion Tap*. This is great, but you have to be wary about appearing too strong too quick, as if you have too much pool people will start to think you are the primary threat.

The bane of vote decks is generally *being blocked*. Light intercept means that a critical vote can be blocked, and once combat begins options may be limited for the vote deck. The no repeat action rule means that even if you manage to use Majesty to end combat and untap, you still can't call another vote that turn with that vampire.

If your predator or prey is a vote deck, and you have the opportunity to block a referendum, then always consider doing so. If nothing else, you can get a lot of mileage out of threatening to block, and having the vote deck player grant you some concession or favour to not do so.

The other risk to vote decks is *being rushed*. This is slightly less problematic, as its just board control rather than interfering with your actions, but still a determined rush deck can easily torpor all your vampires in a single turn. As you can't do much about this with cards, you should look to prevent it with tabletalk and dealmaking. Note that its sometimes worth considering alternate combat safety packages to the classic "combat ends" cards, especially if you're in a metagame heavy with *Immortal Grapples*. Consider instead damage prevention cards (as Ventrue have both Fortitude and Presence this is a strong option for them) or one

shot high-damage cards (a Brujah Princes deck for example might carry a few copies of *Death of My Conscience* to scare people).

Vulnerability to combat is exacerbated by the fact that when you're playing well, your vamps rarely have much blood on them, as you tend to *Minion Tap* straight after *Voter Captivations*. On the bright side, should a vampire get torpored, you will likely still have vote dominance and thus have some protection against being diablerised through control of the Blood Hunt vote.

3.3 Classic Rush

1) How does this deck win the game?

A classic rush deck enters combat with the minions of other players, and achieves board control through this goal. It removes pool through attached effects or through late game bleeds. It defends primarily through board control.

2) What cards should you use?

In your crypt, you will generally want to work with anything from one to three disciplines, but most rush decks will use two disciplines. Whatever disciplines you pick, you'll generally want the lowest capacity vampires that have at least one of the disciplines at superior. The classic rush deck is a Brujah Potence-Celerity deck, that works best with vampires that have superior in both.

The library should include the following:

Master Cards - Classic rush decks are generally fast cycling, so you have little room for master cards. Nonetheless, some master cards really work well in a rush deck. One key card is *Fame* - this master card causes the controller of vampire to lose 3 pool when torpored. A classic rush deck trick is to put Fame down on a prey's vampire in the master phase, then rush it to send it into torpor. Not only do you do a little pool damage, but you significantly weaken your prey. Other Master Card slots are generally best filled with staple cards, like *Dreams of the Sphinx*, *Elder Library*, etc. Specific cards can lend themselves to specific strategies (such as *Carver's Meat and Packing*).

Combat Cards - There are numerous ways to

make effective combat, but Classic Rush uses Potence/Celerity. Strike cards like Torn Signpost and Undead Strength set up decent base strikes, with additional strike cards from celerity giving extra hits when needed. You'll also want *Immortal Grapples* to counter Combat Ends, or *Psyche* as an alternative, and you'll likely need multiple copies of *Taste of Vitae* to turn damage dealt into blood gained (and ultimately into extra pool). Depending on your style you may want *Disarms* and *Decapitates*. Note that an easy trap that many moderately experienced players fall into is that of over-commitment to damage dealing. Never forget that combat in itself neither ousts your prey nor denies your predator. Combat is a means to an end - a tool that helps establish board control. This means that ideally you want to achieve board control as simply as possible, with a small number of cards and (more importantly) maximum efficiency of permanent resource expenditure. This is called the theory of "*short chain combat*" - essentially, you don't normally need *Torn Signpost + Blur + Death of my Conscience + Pushing the Limit + Undead Strength* to do thirty points of damage, as almost always 5-7 points of damage will torpor most targets in the game. Essentially, you're wasting resources by engaging in long-chain combat when you can achieve the same game effect with less cards. Thus, if in playtesting, you find yourself with a joyous amount of overkill, then consider that it's probably not really a cause to be happy, as it likely means that you've potentially compromised your deck's performance elsewhere by engaging in long chain combat.

Rush Cards - These are the cards that let you enter combat. They are so named because the first one of its kind was called *Bum's Rush* - this remains a staple rush card because of its versatility and simplicity, but numerous alternatives now exist each with their own pros and cons - *Nose of the Hound*, *Ambush*, *Games of Instinct*, *Big Game* and many more. There is also the master card *Haven Uncovered*, which has the benefit of allowing multiple rushes on one target off one card, but has the downside of hand cycling slower. Personally, I disdain *Haven Uncovered* in Classic Rush, as in Classic Rush one minion attacking is normally enough, and Master Phases are too precious to "waste". Regardless, most Classic Rush players will normally dedicate anything from 10-20 cards of their 90 card deck to Rush cards.

Other Cards - Some decks favour including other actions, safe in the knowledge that noone is going to want to block a rush deck. Arson, equipment cards, allies, retainers, are all fairly worthwhile. A Brujah deck might also cross-concepts into a bit of politics as many Brujah are Princes. The Brujah Traditions/Rush deck is one of the most successful fusion concepts. Generally though, it's worth remembering that every card you put in that doesn't rush, fight or benefit rush/fight is essentially diluting your board control effectiveness, so it has to be worth the sacrifice.

3) How do you play this deck, and how do you beat it?

Contrary to newbie expectations, the combat deck is actually the most political sort of deck you can play, at least in terms of inter-player politics.

Consider this: A Rush deck can't defend itself against sneaky-bleed, and can't defend itself against votes. It can't oust its prey quickly. It can't block to interfere with other strategies. All it can do is achieve board control, but it does this effectively.

However, no matter how good your Rush is, you're rarely going to be strong enough to beat down the minions of all 4 players and nibble-bleed your way home. Worse still, any board control you set up to your benefit is invariably going to cause benefit and harm all round the table. Say, for example, you cripple your Prey in a 5 player game. This then releases the pressure off your Grandprey, which in turn pressures your Grandpredator, which in turn gives your Predator more slack to attack *you*. You rush "backwards" and the same happens in reverse.

But also consider that as the master of board control, you have maximum leverage over other players. You can be overt and OTT ("take back that action, or for the next six turns I will do nothing but rush your minions"), or you can be ultra-subtle ("I'm going to take out that minion, that way you'll have one more bleeder than he has blockers, and you'll be able to get through. In return, I want...")

You need to consider the implications of every combat, you need to get something more than

the fight itself out of every fight that occurs (or which doesn't occur), and you need to be constantly aware of the long term dynamic of the table.

Just as playing Rush requires skill, so defeating it requires skill. Rush is all about board control, so its pretty hard (though not impossible) to beat it at its own game. If you Catch a Rush deck you just end up with big casualties all round. If you attack a Rush player aggressively, he'll concentrate his beatdown on you.

When dealing with Rush, diplomacy is the order of the day. Rush decks have a hard time winning, but they also are in a great position to determine who does win the game. Be friends with the Rush deck, or if thats not possible, try to target his resource expenditures on someone else. If you must bleed a Rush deck, either do it inoffensively ("1 point, just to keep the edge off your prey") or decisively ("...and 25 points of bleed this turn. Can't retaliate if you're dead, Mr Brujah."). Having a Rush deck as prey is actually one time when a sneaky bleed deck might want to slow down. A gentleman's agreement of no bleed for no rush for a few turns can give you time to set up the kill.

Rush decks are the VTES equivalent of the MTG Blue Control deck - slow to build, vulnerable to early game aggression, but able to totally dominate if played right.

3.4 Bruise Bleed

1) How does this deck win the game?

It launches stealthless bleeds, which if they get through are hard hitting, and if they are blocked lead to combats that are painful for the blocker.

2) What cards should you use?

In your crypt, you'll want disciplines that can both bleed and fight. A popular choice of combo is Dominate-Potence, partially because these are the strongest bleed and fight disciplines, and partially because there are so many reasonably costed vampires with this combo. Vampires with inherent bleed bonuses are generally great choices for bruise-bleed deck.

The library should include the following:

Master Cards - Bruise-bleed decks can cycle fast or slow, and often its beyond your control

what speed they run at. Because you can't control your combats so easily, the Rush choices of *Fame*, *Carver's*, etc. aren't so sweet. Strong Clan cards are generally a good bet (for example, *Acquired Ventrue Assets*) as are any cards that give pool (*Blood Doll*, of course). A friend of mine that plays Bruise-Bleed also swears by including 2-3 copies of *Haven Uncovered*, as this allows you to not only selectively remove threats as a Rush deck might, but also to "change modes" when your prey is denying you fights by refusing to block, and thus lets you clear your hand out.

Bleed Cards - If your bleeds aren't threatening then its not going to work. Its usual to go with *Govern The Unaligned* plus *Conditioning*, to basically ask your prey "do you want to lose 6 pool, or do you want to fight me?". Govern the Unaligned's superior ability as always is invaluable as well.

Combat Cards - With bruise-bleed, you generally can't rely on combat happening, so you're likely to want to include slightly fewer combat cards than a Rush or Catch deck. Thus bruise-bleed tends to favour *very short chain combat* where you get maximum effect off minimal cards. Cards like *Death of my Conscience* are good here. *Immortal Grapples* to bypass *Strike: Combat Ends* is helpful too, but less essential than in *Rush*.

Defensive Cards - Bruise-Bleed is very direct and straightforward in its core concept, but its less "pure" than sneaky bleed or rush. Its as aggressive as Sneaky-Bleed, but slower, and thus it needs more defence. You'll probably want a bit each of bleed defence and vote defence. Cards like *Deflection* tend to be the best bet for the former, and cards like *Delaying Tactics* or *KRCG News Radio* work well for the latter. *Bruise-Bleed* decks tend to try to have a larger "toolbox" than Rush, Sneaky Bleed or Vote decks.

3) How do you play this deck, and how do you beat it?

Bruise Bleed isn't that hard to play. You call a *Govern the Unaligned* action. If they block, you fight. If they don't you add *Conditioning*. Forward motion is essential for this deck, but by the same count its often worth having an untapped minion with Superior Dominate to work Deflections and the like.

Because you can't select your fights, you have far fewer board control options. In the same way that a Sneaky-Bleed deck can get "stealth logged" you can get "combat logged" by a prey who stubbornly refuses to fight.

Bruise Bleed is often regarded as a great deck for beginners in VTES to play. Its true that *Bruise Bleed* rarely wins tournaments, but played right it can still be a strong contender.

Countering *Bruise Bleed* is easier than countering most decks. As its prey, even though you are offered a crappy choice (take pool loss or fight) it is still your choice. If you have a fighty deck, then square up and duke it out, and you'll probably win. If you have good bleed redirection then send the bruise bleeder where you want them. If you have no bleed defence and no fighting ability then you can take the high risk option of letting him bleed freely, and hope that he runs out of bleed cards before you run out of pool.

The number one best counter to a *Bruise Bleed* deck, however is tabletalk. If you can stall your bruise-bleed predator with threats, or if you can convince everyone that the Bruise-bleeder is a high threat because of that 6 point bleed or wicked combat he just did, you can often turn the table against the *Bruise-bleeder*. Unlike the *Rusher*, the *Bruise-Bleeder* rarely has any leverage in return, as his deck can only do one thing - move forward and bruise-bleed. Unlike the *Sneaky-Bleeder* the *Bruise-Bleeder* can't achieve the necessary speed of forward motion to simply ignore the tabletalk game.

3.5 Catch

1) How does this deck win the game?

It achieves board control through combat, and interferes with the action of other people's decks through intercepting almost everything. Actual victory is normally achieved through attrition.

2) What cards should you use?

In your crypt, you'll want a discipline that can intercept, and a discipline that can fight. In the early life of Jyhad, Tremere Auspex-Thaumaturgy decks were popular, as were Gangrel three-discipline decks, and Auspex-only decks that used weapons. In the modern environment its widely recognised that the

undisputed master of Catch is *Tzimisce*, with the *Ahrimanes* bloodline tailing close second.

The library should include the following:

Master Cards - It is a matter of debate whether Catch decks should include permanent intercept or rely purely on discipline cards. Myself, I prefer to include permanent intercept locations, as added insurance against sneaky-bleed decks and the like. Its well accepted though that the best sort of Master Cards for Catch decks to include are "*honeytrap*" cards. These are master cards that have powerful effects that stay in play, but which can be removed or stolen with directed actions. Examples include the various Powerbases (Powerbase: Mexico synergises well with the *Tzimisce*) and some other high power cards like *Fragment of the Book of Nod*. These cards create opportunities to block for the Catch deck if gone after, and if ignored will provide massive advantage while in play.

Catch Cards - If you can't catch, you're not a catch deck. Catch cards include both cards that grant Intercept, and also cards that help you block otherwise (such as *Rat's Warning*, *Cat's Guidance*, etc.) The nice thing about intercept is that spending cards is generally in your own control. The only way you can be denied is if no minions take any actions, and if that happens then you'll likely do well anyway.

Combat Cards - Bizarrely, this is probably the least important part of a Catch deck. Its nice to make your blocks punishing, buy in fact 90% of board control comes from the act of blocking in and off itself. Regardless, its embarassing to get beaten in combat once you Catch, or for a slippery Ventrue to Majesty past you, so it helps to be able to Catch with proper violence. *Dog Pack* is considered by many to be a de rigeur card, as it permanently prevents Combat Ends.

Attrition Cards - Say it with me again: *You have to oust to win*. many otherwise fine Catch players forget this adage, achieving excellent board control buy failing to get the 3 VP they need because of lack of pool damage. Attrition Cards are generally the Catch decks preferred route to success. *Army of Rats* will nibble down your prey over time, *Smiling Jack the Anarch* will be a more decisive and dangerous tool. The main downside of attrition as a tool is that it is either slow, indiscriminate or both. Thus, to rely on attrition as your means to

victory you need a slow burning high-control deck... i.e. a Catch deck!

Other Cards - As the central strategy itself is a slow-burner, most catch decks will also be slightly toolboxy as well, with a few cards to allow them to do a few different things. In fact, many cards that Catch clans can use lend themselves well to toolbox behaviour. The Tzimisce, for example, mix in light stealth and bleed cards with their combat, while the Tremere (as you might expect) have a handful of blood manipulation tricks. The Tremere in particular can work well with blood attrition (as opposed to pool attrition) through *Theft of Vitae* and *Cryptic Mission*. In the tourney metagame, blood and pool are normally fairly interchangeable (thanks to Blood Dolls and Minion Taps), so this can indirectly help win games as well.

3) How do you play this deck, and how do you beat it?

Playing this deck is done in two parts. First you need to create effective blocks and use them to control the board. Secondly you want to create a situation where your victory is inevitable, usually through attrition. There's no easy way to decide how to do this - you need a good eye and a feel for game theory to know when and where to block. Consider, for example, the following situation: A vampire is with 2 blood rescuing itself from torpor. Do you block? If you do, you'll get a chance to diablerise, but odds are you don't have vote control. Instead, you'd wait, then you'd block the forced *hunt* next turn.

When playing this deck, it's also worth noting that you should always consider blocking everything, and you should usually do so vocally and obviously, even if actions are occurring cross table. This way you give the impression that nothing happens at the table without your permission - an obvious source of leverage when the time comes.

So how do you deal with *Catch* decks? The first option is to stealth past them, but this normally isn't an option except for the most dedicated Sneaky Bleed decks. Fake stealth helps too, as it's harder to deal with. The second option is to outfight them. If you are strong enough to win the resultant combat, then the Catch deck won't get in your way.

Ultimately though, most decks feel very

uncomfortable if they draw a Catch deck as their prey, in the same way that it's not much fun to have a Sneaky Bleed deck as your Predator. However, even if you do get this unlucky pairing either side of you the situation is still workable. Pointing out how bad your situation is can make the other two players identify the game's true threats. Bleed bounces can help balance things. Playing to your deck's strengths might let you win through despite your situation.

Catch decks are hard to counter, as *countering* is their shtick. Instead it's best to focus on succeeding at doing what your deck does, and doing so despite the interference of the catch deck. If you can keep the game dynamic and fast paced, the attrition-based Catch decks won't have time to get a win. If you let them slow the game to treacle, they've as good as won.

3.6 Weenie

1) How does this deck win the game?

It brings out large numbers of small capacity vampires, and attacks with them aggressively, scoffing at any casualties incurred on the way!

2) What cards should you use?

Weenie decks tend to come in two flavours - weenie bleed or weenie vote. There's also weenie rush, weenie corrupt and a few other funky variants, but bleed and vote tend to work best.

Your crypt should be made up of vampires that have small capacities - ideally 1 or 2. Disciplines generally don't matter much, but there's generally room to focus around one or two disciplines - *Presence* is favourite as it can both support voting strategies and give a little bleed. You'll likely end up with a lot of Caitiff or Pander. The star player of the Weenie deck is probably Antoinette Du Champ, who is a teensie caitiff with inferior celerity and presence, but who pays an extra blood for celerity. Why is she great? Because you can ignore the celerity and just have her as the cheapest presence vamp in the whole damn game!

Don't forget to make your Crypt big - While most playstyles struggle to ring out more than a handful of vampires over the course of the game, a weenie deck is at serious risk of

wishing for a bigger crypt with "only" 12 vampires. Make your crypt as big as your deck concept will allow, with minimal duplication.

Master Cards - Popular cards are the influence accelerators, specifically *Information Highway* and *Effective management*. Both of these are essential in large numbers to working a weenie deck, as otherwise you'll be bringing out new vamps at too slow a rate. Weenie bleed decks might also value ways to remove defenders directly - *Pentex Subversion* is a favourite. Weenie Decks, though potentially fast cycling, often don't look to achieve grand effects with their Minion Cards, so it is more acceptable than normal to have an overload of Master cards. If you start using Trifles (*Life in the City* is excellent for weenies) you can easily have 25 or even 35 master cards in a 90 card deck - just be sure to have some of them with Discard abilities or extra Master Phases! A favourite approach of weenie decks is to include a whole mass of *Blood Dolls*, which can let you turn any unused weenies into pool-generators, and can keep your key weenies bleeding with costly actions.

Vote Cards - Several vote cards lend themselves well to weenie decks, but in particular you should look out for the ones that give you a lot of pool when you have a lot of minions. *Diversity* is my favourite - 1 pool per Clan you control to each Methuselah. For most decks this will be 1-3 pool. With a disciplineless weenie deck this can be 10-15 a pop. If you're looking to weenie vote, then as always *Kine Resources Contested* is a great damage source to actually win the game. Finally, if you're looking at Weenie Vote you're likely going to need *Praxis Seizures* and/or *Crusades* to get titles/votes. Other disciplineless options to extra votes are often well worth considering.

Bleed Cards - Computer Hacking is a weak card in most decks, but comes into its own in Weenie Bleed by virtue of being disciplineless. If you use Presence then Legal Manipulations gives welcome extra pool, and Propaganda (if you can afford it) can leave a blocker tapped. Presence greatly increases your options.

Combat Cards - Some weenie decks splash a few combat ends or light strikes, but many weenie decks disregard combat altogether, figuring that there's always more weenies in the crypt anyway.

Stealth/fake stealth - As weenie decks tend to be weak on disciplines they rarely have much room for stealth. True, you could make an obfuscate weenie deck, and do nothing but Spying Missions, but mostly stealth is a luxury that weenie decks lack.

3) How do you play this deck, and how do you beat it?

Playing this deck needs a cavalier attitude to the unlives of your minions. Bring them out fast, line them up and then send them en masse. On the one hand you don't want to commit them piecemeal, but on the other you don't want to sit around for too long either.

A weenie deck in full flow can be a thing of great joy. I've played games where I've had my entire crypt of two dozen Sabbat minions out, with massive vote dominance from early game Crusades, pool flowing in from Diversity votes, Blood Feast putting a blood on each vamp, Blood Dolls sucking it off and KRC votes decimating the opposition. That weenie vote deck has accounted for my only ever victory where I ended the game with more than 100 pool... Light permanent intercept could have destroyed me utterly, but noone had any, so I won with a clean sweep...

On the other hand, weenie decks are vulnerable. They don't do anything well, they just do it in large numbers, so a cool headed defence can defeat them. Also, they're intimidating in scale, so they tend to turn the table against them. They don't have much in the way of board control - it's all aggressive forward movement for them. Finally, they don't tend to do well with pure attrition against them, so if you hold the line for long enough you can keep the horde at bay.

3.7 One Man Army

1) How does this deck win the game?

It brings out a single powerful vampire which you use to do everything!

2) What cards should you use?

Obviously you first need to decide who your One Man Army is. The first decks to use this concept used *Inner Circle Members*, with *Arika* as the clear favourite. Almost any vampire with a strong discipline mix or strong

abilities can work well though - *Stanislava*, *Etrius*, *Enkidu*, *Tariq the Silent*, *Nu The Pillar* all have deck types built around them.

You include 6 or more copies of the key vampire, and then the remaining slots you fill with (usually very low capacity) vampires that support the star of the deck.

The Library itself works around the strengths of the vampire, usually employing a combo or combos that would be hard to work otherwise.

For example, a classic *Stanislava* deck pays attention to the fact that *Stanislava* has a mix of excellent stealth and bleed disciplines, but also access to combat ends cards, and uses cards like *Govern The Unaligned* and *Conditioning* to bleed, *Freak Drive* to untap, *Form of Mist* and *Earth Control for Stealth*, *Earth Meld*, *Damage reduction* and *Obedience* for combat avoidance. For extra actions after the *Freak Drive* you can use cards like *Restoration*, or splash in some politics. For extra untaps you can use *Rats Warnings* and *Cats Guidance*, and for bleed defence you can use *Deflection*. The deck is covered in 360 degrees, thanks to *Stanislava*'s general talent and superiority.

One Man Army decks normally require a degree of combat safety against Rush - *Obedience* is choice, as it is not countered by *Immortal Grapple*. One Man Army decks also like to be able to untap - *Freak Drive* is popular.

Other *One Man Army* decks work less on general superiority and more on a single trick. The *Tariq* deck for example works on a combination of *Tariq*'s ability along with *Rowan Ring* and *Amaranth*, plus *Psyche* to beat Combat Ends, which essentially results in *Tariq* performing multiple rushes each turn, with each rush burning a vampire outright - the ultimate in board control.

Getting the star out fast is often essential - *Information Highway* and *Zillah's Valley* help here. Keeping your star alive is handy (*Secure Haven*), and if it all goes wrong and your star is somehow negated, its good to have a self destruct option like *Golconda* to reclaim the pool invested (and then use that pool to bring out a new copy!)

3) How do you play this deck, and how do you beat it?

Playing this deck needs you to work your star. You need to know how your deck works and you need to make sure that your hand flows and doesn't clog up. Its also vital to get your star into play fast, and to keep him there.

Beating the deck is usually as simple as eliminating the star. Any One Man Army deck worth its salt provides its star with some protection against rush, but there are plenty of "silver bullet" strategies which will kill off a One Man Army deck, favourite amongst which are *Sensory Deprivation* and *Pentex Subversion*.

3.8 Other Decks of Note

This list can never be exhaustive, but be on the watch out for the following:

Princes Deck: A variant on the political deck, but one which uses a lot of the Traditions cards for added versatility.

Black Hand Toolbox: Often obfuscate based, uses the superior toolboxing of Black Hand vampires to win by attrition. Generally regarded as second tier.

Go Anarchs! The ultimate toolbox decks, generally using lots of small vampires. Very versatile but often too slow to work well. Generally regarded as second tier.

Also be on the look out for "Toolbox" decks that don't follow any one strong theme but attempt to be a little bit good at everything. Note that generally people use "toolbox" as an excuse for a substandard and directionless deck, but occasionally you do see toolbox decks that win, and win consistently, mostly because they find a way to toolbox efficiently and effectively.

As a general rule of thumb, when you toolbox you want to be using individual cards that have multiple functions rather than including lots of different cards with one function each.

Each Clan tends to have certain themed decks that work very well as well, though often these are regarded as second tier compared to a deck constructed around a role. Bloodlines and Independent Clans are often "gimmick-based" where the clan has a particular shtick that they can do well.

4. Playing the Table

One of the great features of VTES is that how you build your deck is only one part of getting victory. Much more so than most CCGs, it's how you play that determines whether you win or not.

4.1 Hand Control

To win, a player has to be able to play the right cards. Deck is one part of this, but it's always important to realise that you can manipulate your hand, and the hands of other players.

For beginner VTES players the following "rules" are generally worth considering:

*** It's almost always worth discarding.**

Even if your hand looks close on perfect, it's extremely unlikely that you want to hold off discarding. The only circumstances you should consider not discarding are if other players are under a misapprehension as to the type of deck you are playing (and you don't want to disabuse them of their notions by revelation through discards) or if you are towards the end of the game and running out of cards.

*** If you can play a card, you normally should do so.**

It's worth it just to keep your hand moving and cycling. As time goes on you'll get a feel for when you want to hold on to the cards in your hand, but for the most part it's good to play cards as this keeps your hand dynamic, and presents you with new options.

*** Be aware of "fast cycling" and "slow cycling" cards.**

Master cards, for example, can only be played 1 per turn so are slow cycling by definition. On the other hand, action cards are generally easy to cycle as you can control when you play them, and reactions which are easy to play (such as untaps and the like) are quick cycling as well. If you carry too many slow cycling cards in your hand at one time, then your hand will jam up.

More advanced players will want to consider the following concepts as well:

*** Examine and count every card that hits the discard.**

First count your own cards. If you have seven of eight Majestys in the graveyard, and sixty of ninety cards still in the library, then you're down

to a one in sixty chance of drawing a majesty with each draw. Be aware of the exact numbers in your deck, and work the probabilities carefully.

Second, keep watch on other people's discards. Not only can you read what sort of deck they are playing, but you can also guess what is currently in their hand. If they discard stealth, for example, then that means they almost certainly have more stealth in their hand. On the other hand, when you see them play long chain combat, you can be 90% certain that for the next 1-2 turns they won't be ready to do that again, so you can fight them with greater impunity. You can even count the cards of each type going into their graveyard, and make an educated guess as to how many more cards of that type they'll have in their library, and come up with guesstimate probabilities on their next draws.

*** Deliberately control your opponent's hands.**

Most players know about "stealth logging", where you decline to block in order to jam a sneaky-bleed predator's hands with stealth, and thus diminish their bleeding ability. What most don't realise is that you can manipulate someone's hand in any number of ways beyond this. Know how to draw out certain combat cards, how to probe for bounce-cards, and how to control the contents of someone's hand. Consider every action you or anyone else makes, and consider the likely effect it has on someone's hand. Watch reactions carefully too, as this can be telling. When your prey calls a hunt, look at your grandprey to see if he checks his hand. If your grandprey deliberates long enough, it is likely he's considering whether to intercept or not.

4.2 Threat Recognition

A lot of newer VTES players have a hard time reading the table as to who has the upper hand. A few tips for the new players:

*** Blood is Life**

Blood on vampires in play, plus blood in the Methuselah's pool, gives a good indication of overall strength. Pool > Blood though, so beware especially of a player who looks to have a weak position but who has accumulated a lot of pool. Likely he's biding his time.

*** It's always the quiet ones**

A quiet VTES player either means that they have no clue how to tabletalk, or that they're trying not to be noticed. Watch them carefully, as likely they will be threats soon.

* **Table control**

Don't just look at on table resources, but rather look at who controls the ebb and flow of action. For example, while its important to know how many votes each Methuselah has access to, its also important to see how safe those votes are from being neutralised and how they are likely to be employed. A Sneaky-Bleed player, for example, who has the Malkavian Prince Gilbert Duane might have 2 votes, but he won't be likely to be using him for the votes, and anyone who wants to remove those votes from the equation will be able to rush him out very easily. Look also at the interplay of stealth and intercept around the table, and at the ability of each Methuselah to gain pool with on-table resources, for example through Blood Dolls, minions with Superior Dominate, princes, etc.

4.2 Dealmaking and Psychology

As a five player game, VTES can be won or lost in *dealmaking*. As a rule of thumb, I always keep the letter of my agreements, but will often break the spirit of agreements. For example, I might agree not to bleed someone on the following turn if they do something for me, but may still call a vote to cause them pool loss. Very few decks can afford to avoid dealmaking altogether, so make deals whenever and wherever you can.

Its often a good idea to extract a deal from someone for something you were going to do anyway. For example, if while playing a rush deck your sneak-bleed predator has put you on the defensive, you might want to spend a turn or two demolishing your predator's vampires. If you're going to do that, you might as well extract a deal or two. Get something from your prey in exchange for not taking aggressive action against him for the next two turns. Get something from your grandpredator for weakening his prey!

My main rules for fair play and sportsmanship in dealmaking are as follows:

* Always operate within the confines of a single game. Never, for example, promise that you'll do something outside of the game, or in the next game in exchange for an in-game favour.

* Never let anyone be under any illusion that you mean to win the game. If you establish from the outset that you intend to play competitively, even in a casual environment, then your dealmaking will sit much more comfortably with the friends you play with.

Finally, be aware the psychology goes way beyond dealmaking. Always consider what your opponents are thinking, and how you can affect their thoughts to your advantage. This can start before the game even begins - for example you could let everyone know that you're *"trying out a new deck, so its not going to be very aggressive"* or you could go the other way and say you *"can't wait to try out this new combat combo - its devastating!"*. It has to be said though, in VTES you always must strike a balance between not seeming to be the dominant force in a game (as people will recognise you as a threat and team up against you) and not appearing to be too weak.

4.4 Network Dynamic

Network Dynamic is the idea that every action you take has a knock on effect on the whole game.

As mentioned before, consider the pressure situation in a five player game. Players in VTES are often described as having "postures" such as "probe / kill / consolidate/ etc." A kill posture, for example, is an attempt to move forward and oust your prey.

The problem with adopting a kill posture in a five player game is that this pressures your prey, putting them on the defensive. This allows your grand prey more freedom to pressure your grand predator, and in turn takes pressure off your predator... leaving him free to attack you!

Beacuse of this natural dynamic in a five player game its often observed that the worse possible thing you can do in a five player VTES game is to be the first to make a full-attack. To probe cautiously is ok, as that doesn't upset the network dynamic too much, but if there is an odd number of players, then making an all out attack is generally self destructive.

Having said that, the above situation assumes equal player skill and equal deck types. If you have a weak player or easy target as prey, or if you are playing an all-out aggressive deck,

sometimes there is no choice but to go for the kill.

When the first player is ousted, the game drops to 4 players. The whole situation now changes. Now, pressuring your prey will release your grand prey, and that in turn will pressure your predator. Theoretically, as soon as the game hits 4 players, its time to be as aggressive as possible.

Once you hit three players, you have to change gear again. if you are the dominant player in a three way split, you often don't have the luxury of changing down a gear, and must just push to kill again as quickly as possible. If you are one of the non dominant pair though, it often arises that you can maek a 2-on-1 alliance. In a three player game the pressure dynamic matters a lot less than the dealmaking.

Once you get down to 2 players, there's no need to consider network dynamic any more!

5.0 Metagaming

In CCG terms, metagaming is paying attention to the "game beyond the game", and is a sign of a smart tournament player. Essentially, be aware that to a degree VTES is very much like rock-paper-scissors... every deck has its foil.

Pay attention to each round of games, and the last few beforehand even when playing casually. Select your deck according to this.

For example, if you see a lot of non-Camarilla decks then its time to try out your *Protect Thine Own* deck! On the other hand, if everyone seems to be carrying light intercept, then politics is probably worth abandoning in favour of sneaky-bleed.

Sadly the only way to metagame well is to invest time and money into the game. Time, because you'll need to keep abreast of the tourney scene and know whats hot and not right now. Money, because you'll always need more cards!