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Dark Conspiracy

Publisher: GDW, Box 1646, Bloomington, IL 61702

Author: Lester Smith

Price: \$22

Reviewed by Stewart Wieck

It's set a few years in the future and contains many of the same elements, but the world of **Dark Conspiracy**, the new game of modern horror from GDW, is not a cyberpunk setting. Sure, there are corporations that dominate the world market and urban settings that are out of control, but there are some important differences.

First, the level of technology has, in general, decreased. Called RetroTek, the goods available to average people look like the bulky, vacuum-tube products of previous decades. Also, the setting has a bit of "camp" in it because of the tabloid-style situations and encounters. Finally, the most important difference is the existence of the Dark Minions, "servants of the evil force feeding off the world's agony."

The size and presentation of the book makes a good buy for \$22. The book is 336 pages and includes several sets of color plates. The plates are excellently utilized as important information is invariably imparted on those pages. Ok, two of the four sets of plates are used to provide color pictures of known Dark Races and other Beasties, but the other two are information-oriented. A player can read "Dark Times" and gain a good grasp of the setting involved in the game, and a Gamemaster could read "Dark Earth" and understand much of what is really going on.

The book itself is divided into three major sections. One is for Players, another for Referees, and the last is simply Equipment and Reference Charts. Of the last section, Equipment alone constitutes over 50 pages. The first half of this space is dedicated to describing the expected weapons and devices, though things like cyber hands are discussed as well. The remainder of the section deals with a large variety of weapons and vehicles, each of which is individually illustrated and described in terms of game mechanics. Six types of robots are in this section as well.

Of all the reference charts that follow the equipment, the Character Generation Worksheet is easily the most useful. This is a two-page spread that takes a player right through the process of making a character. Math equations and page references are provided. This is a great play aid.

The Players section deals with character generation and most of the game's mechanics. The game system is essentially the same as that GDW uses in **Twilight: 2000**, so little information needs to be supplied here about that aspect of the game. For those who are familiar with **Twilight: 2000** and are

checking out this game, look for the Conversion Notes on page 136 while browsing in the store.

The Referees section describes one of the most important elements of any new RPG — the setting. A few pages of hints for running the game are in this section, along with some things that are likely to attract the immediate attention of many gamers — Beasties and Dark Races. Also here are some details about Dark Tek. Especially fun is the section about biocomputers.

The Referee's section is rounded out by a short introductory adventure called "Ravens Wolves" and information on creating further adventures. It's in this latter area that the game really lost my attention. The game suggests that referees create adventures by adapting stories from tabloids. Though this approach fits the game as a whole (see below), I find it very dissatisfying. This will probably appeal to the tastes of some gamers, but in my mind it makes light of what could be a very interesting setting. If the game had been approached in a more humorous fashion, then the tabloid approach might have succeeded. But the horrors of ecological destruction innate to the futuristic setting and a dolphin killing frogmen with a nosegun just don't mesh.

I found myself trying very hard to like this game. I've been one of the many to get caught up in the recent craze for dark future games that started with R. Talsorian's **Cyberpunk**. While there is a lot of good material available here and though the game system is a nice one, I ultimately found that the game let me down. "[D]o not let this betrayal of secrets kill your own sense of the **Dark Conspiracy** mystique" the rules plead when the authors prepare to "talk frankly about the ingredients that make up the . . . milieu," but that fell on deaf ears with me. Maybe it's because the truth is so closely related to the tabloid aspect of the game that I disliked, but the revelations in this section of the book completely shattered any serious expectations I had of the setting. I can get game systems out of any new package from any publisher, so it's a game's setting that has to be the item worthy of note. In **Dark Conspiracy** the setting just seems too thin to work with.

Appearance: 3 (nice interior artwork and color plates throughout, but disappointing cover)

Components: n/a (book only)

Complexity: 3 (the basic system is easy to use, but there are many one-use equations that could try the patience of some)

Playability: 4 (the game's *strong suit*; players are sure to find interesting characters to roleplay)

Sum: 3

Vampire Hunting in *Dark Conspiracy*TM

By Lester Smith

So you want to know how to hunt and kill a Vampire?
Sorry — you've already lost the battle.

What do I mean, you ask? Well, let me answer that question with another question.

Just what is a Vampire? Do you really know?

The easy answer is contained in the Websters definition: A Vampire is "the reanimated body of a dead person believed to come from the grave at night and suck the blood of persons asleep." And over a century cinema has indoctrinated us in the supposition that Vampires cannot stand daylight (these days, who can?), that they cast no reflection (it's one of the more inexpensive special effects), that they're allergic to garlic (I don't like it myself), that sacred items of religious import — crosses and holy water — turn them away or burn them on contact (who said religion was dead?), and that they can be killed by driving a stake through their heart (which would kill me just as dead).

But people, we're talking legends here. Do you believe Pecos Bill used a rattlesnake for a whip and rode a tornado bareback? No! Do you believe Paul Bunyan tied a rope to the end of a river and pulled it straight? Of course not!

So why would you bet your life on holy water and a wooden stake?

Blood suckers thrive on such ignorance, they delight in it. Many of them intentionally perpetuate the legends, just to keep the fools among us confused. They know that humans outnumber them by at least ten thousand to one, and that if we could ever get our act together, we'd utterly destroy them. So they sow the seeds of disinformation and dissention, then sit back and laugh in delight at the results. We are our own worst enemies in this fight.

In my own experience, for example, I've encountered at least three different creatures that could have passed for Vampires. One left withered corpses when it fed, but turned out to be a half plant refugee from some Aztec nightmare. Another had the pale, corpse-like look, but leached the heat from its victims, rather than drink their blood. The third maintained an illusion of humanity, drank blood, and even kept a coven of duped followers, but in the end turned out to be a hideous

leathery thing like some sort of gargoyle. I've also heard of buildings that grow by feeding upon the fluids of human beings deposited there, and phantoms that drain the very life force of those who venture near it. Only one of these suffered a weakness similar to those mentioned in the myths — it proved to be vulnerable to ultraviolet light, so it avoided going



out in the sun. Never have I met a classic Vampire. Never do I expect to ever do so.

Okay, so if we cannot trust in the details given by the legends, how *do* we go about fighting these creatures?

(continued on page 24)



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Vampire Hunting...

First you have to do some solid investigation and research, in regards to the precise being which you hunt. Do you suspect a Vampire is prowling your neighborhood? Find out everything you can about the situation before you try to confront the creature. Work to determine its habits, then analyze them for clues to its nature. Once you have collected enough clues, try to put them together into an overall, composite picture of what the being might be like. See if you discover or project any weakness it has that might be exploited. Then arm yourself to take advantage of those weaknesses. While such information is your most valuable resource, never forget that chances are you are completely wrong.

When doing your investigation, ensure that you document everything. You might get lucky and acquire an accurate enough piece of evidence that can be of great assistance to other hunters, even if you wind up dead. At the very least, the fact that you have such a report sitting at home might be enough to draw the monster out of hiding after its done with you. And once it has been drawn out, it is much more vulnerable to other hunters. Sometimes the very best of baits is yourself.

This brings up another very important issue. That is, don't hunt these evil creatures alone. As humans with such

depth of tribal instinct, our strength is always in our numbers and in our ability to work together. We work best in teams, where our skills can complement one another, our knowledge is at its fullest, and our inventiveness is maximized. What's more, if a team gets into a bad situation, some of its members can sacrifice themselves to let the others get away with the priceless knowledge gained from the encounter. Such self-sacrifice is the best of ways in which to die.

Working in teams also means our battle strength is increased. Even the nastiest of blood-suckers will go down if enough firepower is trained upon it. I suggest carrying as much weaponry as you conceivably can. Of course, there are dangers in that approach as well. For one thing, you have to worry about local citizens who might take exception to heavily armed groups of strangers invading their neighborhoods. They might easily respond with heavy weaponry of their own. For another thing, the more heavily armed team members are, the more dangerous they are to their own friends, should they panic or fall under the mental domination of the creature whom they hunt.

Indeed, many of these dark creatures have incredibly psychic powers. They can make you see things that aren't even there, or misperceive things that are. More than one group of hunters has shot itself to pieces after one or more of its members fell sway to an illusion that made the rest of the team seem to become monsters.

That's why every group needs to have one member that is skilled at fighting that sort of battle. Empaths can serve a team as a sort of psychic grounding, helping the members to see through the smoke of mirrors that so many dark creatures hide behind. Too many people make the mistake of discounting empaths because they are so often physically or mentally unimposing, or simply because they are not quite in synch with normal, rational, Western thought. As if anything in the world were.

I cannot stress enough the importance of team work. The sort of human bonds that are forged in such a setting are the complete opposite of the self-centered nature of blood suckers and their ilk. It is my opinion that these dark creatures have no way of understanding what friendship and love can accomplish, and that, as a result, our best chance of surprising them, of catching them off guard at a crucial moment, is by fostering reliance upon one another in a team.

Of course, I may be wrong, I have been before. . . too many times.

Let this be my final warning to you. When I first became aware of these dark creatures who haunt our world, I relied too heavily upon the myths I was familiar with, and several close friends paid the price. Through this experience, though, I've learned to always expect the unexpected, to be inventive on the spur of the moment, to rely on my friends, and to trust my instincts. So far, that package has kept me alive.

I hope it does as much for you.

Hunting the Hunters...

reason loners among our kind only survive if they are powerful enough to be one of the Inconnu — they never find out that Joe "Sunshine" Witch-Hunter is after them until the great orb rises . . . and they're outside. While they have strength in numbers, so do we . . . and that may just be enough of a shock to let us gain the upper hand.

- Try and cultivate allies and contacts in mortal institutions. I know at least one Kindred who saved herself from an early-morning surprise because of her friendship with the neighborhood priest. So instead, her Jesuit hunter got the late-night, last-rite visit.

- If they have supernatural abilities you cannot counter, then your next line of defense, and one of your best offenses once you know you're being hunted, are other mortals. Not only can they defend you during the day while you play sleeping beauty, but they can also get the hunter off your tail through misdirection, lies and out-and-out violence. Always treat your retainers well.

- Of course, your best protection is yourself. Once you know they're after you, the game changes. You have to keep your composure and not let them know you're on to them, but when you get the chance, mm mm good. In face of their continued activities, however, the best option may well be to just run away.



Galakhan has had a good day --- since this morning, he's successfully raided a temple of Hera, taken several holy relics, a powerful artifact, and slain a dozen high-ranking priests, turning a nice profit on the side.

...Hera is **not** happy

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