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*Would you like fries
with that?*

Out of the Ordinary7



by Graeme Davis
*Need to spook your Call of Cthulhu
players? Give them something
unexpected.*

Nekromancy17

by John Nephew
*Demon summoning, Al Amarja-style,
from someone who's been Over the
Edge.*



Subterranean25



by Serge Stelmack
*An introductory Bug Hunt™ for your
Whispering Vault team.*

Bad Things33

by David Perry
*Think you know what goes bump in
the night? Think again.*



About the Cover

"I SEEEEE YOUUUUUU..."
*Keith Parkinson's slimy
voyeur sneaks a peak at
our readers, just in time
for October. You
wouldn't believe how
long it took to get the
gunk off the rest of
the issue.*



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Race Relations41

by Alexander Shearer

Bring some pep to your fantasy RPG species. Okay, it's not scary; sue us.

The Devil You Know51

by Lee Garvin

Curses, cowards, and a skunky spring make this a Deadlands adventure to remember.



Strange Vistas67

The Bureaucrat

by Edward J. Carmien

Washington politics, World of Darkness-style.

The Edge71

Comics, cartoons, plus a list of scary movies... it's like it's Halloween or something.



Editorial4

Guide to Advertisers

Agents of Gaming	72
Alderac Entertainment	48
Archangel Entertainment	46-47
Archon Games	IFC
Atlas Games	54
Avalanche Press	22
Chameleon Eclectic	85
Chaosium, Inc.	16
Columbia Games	69
Darkest of the Hillside Thickets	79
Dragon Multimedia	70
Dungeonworks	66
Fat Messiah Games	30
Five Rings Publishing	23, 62
Global Games	61
Holistic Design	6
I.C.E.	IBC

Manticore Games	32
Mayfair Games	40
Myrmidon Press	14
Nova Eth Publishing	24
One Small Step	90
Pioneer Entertainment	9
Plaid Rabbit Productions	80
Precedence Publishing	55
Raven Star Games	66
Rubicon Games	22
Shadow Graphics	30
Steve Jackson Games	56
TSR	13, 29, 37, 53, 77
Weapons Emporium	68
West End Games	38
White Wolf Games	21, 45
Wizards of the Coast	1, 5, BC

The Bureaucrat

by Edward J. Carmien

Strange Vistas™

Fiction from White Wolf's World of Darkness.

Winters set his Queen's pawn forward two squares. There was, I mused, an absence about him, as if he were bereft of a long-time friend or lover. We were sitting in a dark bagel shop next to the great Library.

"You don't really want a game, do you?" I asked kindly. He was my sort, so it was safe to intrude on his silence.

Winters shrugged. I counter-moved. His chess knowledge was strong but his intrinsic ability appeared to be only average. Without a clock, we were evenly matched.

He paused, then, and leaned back, though there was little to consider after only two moves. His leather jacket creaked. Out front was the motorcycle on which he foolishly traipsed across the country. I gestured to it.

"You know, a sensible man would consider what might happen if that contraption of yours broke down in the wilderness, far from the safety of a city."

That brought a smile, at least.

"I don't mind taking chances," he said, and moved a knight into the fray.

Yes, he was a lonely one, our Winters. He didn't yet have a role he could settle into, a comfortable existence in which dull and predictable were valued elements. A kind of pity sparked into life somewhere within me. I would help him, if I could.

"How about a story, then?" I suggested as I mirrored his knight move.

"A story?" he asked, a flicker of interest lighting his eyes.

"Certainly. I tell a fine story, and I'm always careful to put myself in the proper perspective."

Winters sighed and looked into the well-lit night. "What kind of story?" he said after a moment.

"Well," I said, "do you know what I do here in the nation's capital?"

"The museums are said to be the best," Winters said with a laugh.

"True," I admitted. "For pleasure. For business, I handle Bureaucrats." I watched as he returned his gaze to the board and moved a pawn to allow his bishop egress into the fray.

I moved again quickly and continued. "For instance, take my most recent work..."

...

Croydon was pissed. Four years at Harvard, the three-year law program in two and a half at Yale, and eighteen months doing scut work for the party had landed him a peachy assistant-to-the-assistant job in the White House.

And now he was out on his —

"So, Harry, is this transfer what you wanted?" Alice stuck her head in his door and watched him slam files into a box. He glared at her for an answer. The news was obviously making the rounds.

"Oh, sorry," she said. Alice was on the First Lady's staff. They'd flirted a little, even had a drink or two down in Georgetown after a long Saturday at the office. "Hey, give me a call sometime, OK?"

Harry kept at his packing, and Alice went on her way. Sure, he thought bitterly to himself, call her sometime. He checked his watch. They'd called him to personnel at four in the afternoon, canned him by 4:25, and he had to be out by six.

...

"Do you really know all this?" asked Winters. I sighed.

"I know the bare-bones. Allow me to fill the details with life." Mid-game was upon us, and I was down two pawns but held the center, and, for the moment, the tempo.

"You mean you'll tell the tale as if..."

"Of course!" I interrupted cheerfully. "Putting myself into proper perspective. Now, where was I..."

...

Harry Croydon closed the last box. The tape went back into his desk: he'd leave a nice set-up for the next sucker who got this job. He hit the switches on his computer, checked that his keys were in his pocket, along with his White House I.D., and grabbed the stuff he'd packed. Five minutes to spare.

The guards searched his boxes thoroughly while he stood by and waited. After they were done he closed the boxes again and picked them up.

"Package for you, Mr. Croydon," said Phil, the shift supervisor. He handed Harry a plain white envelope with his name typed on a label.

"Whatever," said Harry. At his car, he stopped

to toss the envelope onto the front seat. The boxes went in the trunk. Inside, he still seethed with anger and hurt. No one would speak to him: there had been no reason given for his dismissal. None was needed, given the kind of position he held — had held.

He sat behind the wheel for five minutes, enjoying the sunset, trying to relax. It was just before seven when he finally turned to the envelope. What he found there made him pound the wheel in frustration until his hand ached.

"G-12," he murmured to himself. "Policy Archive Librarian and Consultant," he read. The envelope contained a thick sheath of Federal paperwork relating to some sort of Fed job. The cover letter was on the bottom.

"Dear Mr. Croydon," it read, "You have been selected to be the next Policy Archive Librarian and Consultant. If you are interested in the position, or if you have questions, please feel free to stop in this evening at exactly 7:30 PM, in the Hamilton conference room at the Watergate. Due to the recent passing of Frank Diller, the previous Policy Archive Librarian and Consultant, this position must be filled this evening..."

He'd never heard of this Diller guy. Croydon stopped reading. Suddenly his pain had a name... what was it... Smith, there at the bottom.

...

"You're Smith, I assume?" said Winters. It was good to see him smile. I nodded. I'd lost the tempo, and my control of the center was becoming moot as a serious attack on my left flank developed ominous strength.

...

Croydon started his car. Smith had obviously pulled some strings, gotten him canned at the White House so he could pull him into this nothing Fed job. That wasn't the plan, no sir! Harold G. Croydon had it all mapped out: the best education family connections and money could arrange, a few years as a party staffer and even as White House flunky, then a career in his home state as a State Senator, a Congressman, perhaps Governor. With a little luck, higher national office.

Croydon hadn't ever let it past his lips what higher national office he sought, but he knew to the year when he'd be eligible. That dream was-

n't going to be derailed by a petty bureaucrat!

He made the meeting time with seconds to spare, pushing open the door to the small conference room without knocking. After he gave this Smith a talking to, he'd pull a few strings himself. Fed white-collar workers were immune to many forms of persuasion and pressure, but not all!

The conference room was dark, lit only by dim lamps upon the round table. Smith sat there, a still figure in a black wool suit. There were a few papers on the table. He watched quietly as Harry Croydon unleashed his initial barrage.

"What the hell is this all about?" he shouted, slamming the white envelope onto the table. "Who the hell do you think you are, getting me booted out of the White House, and then delivering this crap to me on my way out? Is that your idea of some kind of sick joke?"

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable sitting down, Mr. Croydon?" asked Smith, in a liquid, pervasive tone.

Croydon sat and was quiet for a moment, then became angry again. He pounded the table, half in anger and half in frustration. "What do you think I'm going to do? Sign this employment agreement? It's not in the cards, buddy. I came here to take a pound of flesh out of your hide before I get your ass kicked so far off the Hill that—"

Mr. Smith interrupted quietly, without effort. His placid words calmed Croydon. "Now, now, Mr. Croydon. I know you're upset. But your country needs you in this job. You'll have private, on-demand access to the President and his cabinet 24 hours a day. You'll be in the loop on all cabinet-level activities. You'll have access to top-level reports from all Federal agencies: the NSA, the FBI, and so on."

Croydon stared for a moment, then said "You're a goddamned spook!" His voice rose in pitch at the end, almost cracked.

Smith shook his head, but did not laugh. "No, Mr. Croydon, not in the way you imagine. Like you, I'm merely a functionary, a bureaucrat, a cog in a much larger machine. I have a job to do, and you have a job to do. Don't you agree?"

Harry Croydon sat back in his chair and shook his head. "No, no way I'm going to be shuffled into some Fed job. I'll just hit the local circuit. Back in my home district, they say Sherman's giving up his seat. I could run for that, I'd lose, but I could run and it would get my name out..."

"Harry," said Smith quietly. "You're not listening to me. This job needs you. I picked you from hundreds of candidates. When you hear more about it... you'll want the job. Trust me." He leaned into the light, then, and Croydon was struck by the pale beauty of the man's cheeks, of the sculpted lines of his neck in contrast to his dark suit.

Croydon caught his breath and said nothing. "There, there, Mr. Croydon," said Smith. "Aren't you curious about what the job entails?"

Croydon, still awestruck, nodded. Smith leaned back, out of the light, but Harry could still see him, now that his eyes had adjusted to the relative gloom.

"Well, Harry, it's really quite simple. There are certain things the President can't be trusted to know. Certain knowledge has a corrosive effect on the human soul. The Federal Government, in its wisdom, concentrates that knowledge into one office. That office has one employee. That employee is the Policy Archive Librarian and Consultant."

Croydon nodded slowly, as if he understood.

"Good," said Smith. "Sometimes, in the course of doing business, different agencies learn a bit of this or that. Eventually, that information will make its way to your office, to you. The Archive part of the job involves recording this information. The Consultant part has to do with assuring that no department or agency takes action they shouldn't regarding such information."

Croydon sat quietly, transfixed by Smith's penetrating voice. Smith continued.

"And since you have a record, there's no need for any other agency to keep certain information. You see that files are purged and databases kept clean of unnecessary clutter that might distract hard-working Americans from their jobs. Do you understand?"

Croydon nodded, then struggled to speech as a diver might struggle to the surface from deep below the water.

"What... information?" he said finally. "Very good," said Smith approvingly. "Here, take some water." He poured ice water into a cut-glass tumbler.

Croydon looked about himself. He'd almost been overcome by the darkness, by Smith's smooth speaking voice. And he was hungry: he'd skipped dinner and it was past eight.

"Do you mean to tell me there's a man who works for the Government who—"

"Wait for it," I said reprovingly. We were on our second game, and it was now past midnight.

"What information?" asked Smith. "Good question. Well, there is a mountain of it, really. To begin, there are the extra-terrestrials."

Croydon laughed. "Yeah, right," he said, a little belligerence coming back into his voice.

"Ah, no, but I'm perfectly serious," said Smith with a grin. Croydon noticed his teeth were very... white. "The Air Force had quite a to-do with them years back. Whenever there's a rash of accidental crashes of fighter aircraft, you can be assured UFOs were involved."

"Oh, really? And I suppose we've been invaded by little green men, but the Army takes care of those?" wisecracked Croydon.

Smith nodded approvingly. For Harry Croydon to be properly directed, he needed to be feisty. "Keep that sense of humor, Mr. Croydon. In addition to Aliens, there are the many files about paranormal human beings: you know, people who can see the future, bend spoons with their minds, and so on. Subjects right out of Friday — or is that Sunday? — night television."

Croydon stood and put his hands on his hips. "I don't know what kind of an idiot you think I am, Smith," he said coldly, "but this is going nowhere. I don't want the job. I'm going to have you fired for what you've done to my career—and I can arrange it, too. I'm—" Croydon was cut short as Smith hissed.

Long and drawn out, it wasn't human, that hiss. It raised goose bumps on Croydon's neck and arms. He shivered and backed for the door. In a blur, Smith was upon him. Pinning Croydon's arms to his sides, Smith bent him backward with ease. Bones ground together in Harry's forearms. He gasped with pain, and his eyes locked upon Smith's.

"Finally, Mr. Croydon," said Smith in a quiet

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penetrating tone, "there are the Vampires, the Undead, drinkers of blood, eternal hunters of the night. There are only a few files about us..."

Croydon whimpered as fangs sank into his throat. Pierced and nailed he quivered: his feet drummed against the door until Smith stepped back toward the table with his prey fixed in his grasp.

...

"Why all the cat and mouse?" asked Winters as we set the board up for game three. We had split the earlier games, and this would be our last for the evening. "Why not just break him to the traces?"

I rubbed the King's crown absently before I set him on the board. "I prefer to work as little as possible," I replied thoughtfully. "By working with a subject you've studied closely, it's possible to achieve remarkable results. You stand them up, outrage them, then take them down again, make them feel helpless. In the end you mold them to your will and they serve more reliably."

"But the time involved... isn't it easier just to..." said Winters, doubt heavy in his tone.

"Ah, Brute force causes anxiety, and anxiety wears away at the bonds of control. My method requires more effort at the beginning... in the fullness of time, I am rewarded, because the subject believes he does a necessary thing, an important thing."

Winters nodded, understanding. "Of course. Back in Denver, there was a museum where I — well, never mind. Your tale?"

...

Croydon came to consciousness quickly, as if he'd been hypnotized and someone had just snapped their fingers to bring him awake. His arms hurt, and in a moment he remembered why.

"Christ!" He stood, knocking the chair backwards. Smith sat across from him, illuminated in the dim light, ruddier and pinker than he had been before. Croydon took a half step to the door of the conference room, then stopped.

"Very intelligent of you, Mr. Croydon," said Smith in his silky voice.

Harry felt his neck. The skin was smooth, unbroken. A ragged laugh escaped him. The thought 'it was a dream,' stopped cold when Smith presented a bloody handkerchief. "You don't imagine we could exist amongst you without means of disguising our bite, do you, Mr. Croydon?"

Harry bent to retrieve the fallen chair. His head throbbed in time with the bruises on his arms. Once seated, he buried his face in his hands. He felt Smith change seats to be beside him.

"Now, now, Harry," said Smith soothingly. "I know it's quite a shock, but you see how important you'll be? The President must never know of us. Very few people do, actually."

Croydon felt ill. "God, the idea that you... people feed on us, kill us like cattle... I can't imagine working with you, can't imagine—"

Smith interrupted with another cruel laugh. "Can't imagine? As we immortals, perhaps, couldn't imagine the firebombing of Dresden, a day when American bombers turned the city into a furnace, roasting tens of thousands of innocents?"

Croydon didn't respond, so Smith continued. "As we couldn't imagine the horror Hitler worked upon the millions who died in his death camps?"

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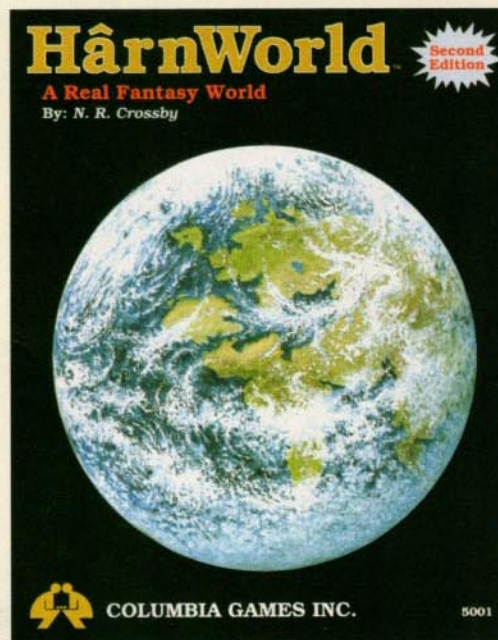
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Still Croydon didn't respond, except to shake his head with denial. "Do you imagine we sat quietly in our mansions and thought nothing was amiss when, with one explosive device, Hiroshima was incinerated in a flash of light and fire?"

Smith grabbed Croydon's face then as he tried to turn away. Gripped by hands that felt like steel, he could do nothing but look helplessly on as Smith continued. "And you can't imagine working to prevent the horrors that would be unleashed if the legions of humanity became aware of what really stalks the night? You can't?"

Smith released Croydon suddenly, so suddenly that he fell back into his chair with a lurch. Absently, Croydon's hands felt his face where Smith had held him.

"You're so... cold," he muttered.

"Pay attention!" Smith said sharply. Croydon focused once again on Smith's face. "It's up to you, Harry. Frank Diller died. He served well, for more than forty years, kept ten presidents safe, and now it's your turn to serve your country."

Croydon turned away with a scowl. "Don't pull that patriotic shit on me, you... thing," he said.

Smith sighed. Croydon noted for the first time that it was a deliberate effect. When he wasn't speaking, Smith was utterly motionless.

Croydon shivered. Sweat beaded on his forehead. "I can't," he said, and repeated himself.

Smith leaned forward then, angling his body unnaturally and pushing his face into Croydon's. "Open your eyes, man," he hissed. "Look at me,

into the mirror. In my kind evil is very personal. We cannot deny the devil walks with us every step of our lives, or whatever spiritual metaphor you wish to employ." He stopped for a moment to assure himself Croydon was able to consider every word.

"But in your kind, evil is impersonal. So many kind men and women, good men and women, yet there is so much horror done! Think of the children left to starve, of the women beaten in so-called domestic violence, of the youth led to violence and death by their fascination with intoxicants!"

"That's not me!" Croydon whispered into Smith's face, only inches away. "I don't do drugs... I don't hurt people..."

"You might think yourself innocent, but you are as guilty as I! You cannot deny your kind does these things! Can you? Can you?" Smith shouted these last words.

A cold sense of truth crept into Croydon. He realized his heart was pounding. Croydon turned away and wept, his voice breaking as he struggled to deny what he knew to be true.

Smith leaned back in his chair. The deed was done in all but several months worth of details. Harold Croydon was his, and his forever.

...

Winters collected the pieces and put them away while he creased his brow. "So he's your man in the government?"

"One of many," I agreed.

"And you're left unmolested here?" Winters asked, handing over the board, which Smith

tucked under the counter.

"I'm left to my own devices, by and large," I said as we left the bagel shop. Dawn was some hours off. "You have adequate housing?"

Winters nodded. "Are you happy here, alone?" He mounted his motorcycle, inserted the key, and raised the stand.

I spied what appeared to be a sword tucked alongside the seat. Interesting, but not rare among our kin. "I'm not entirely alone. I entertain many visitors, such as yourself. Of course, being without constant companions is itself a certain sadness."

He didn't seem satisfied, which meant Winters knew who owned the streets at night in the capital. I shrugged. "I'm willing to do the work, year in, year out. I confine my game-playing to chess. I am exceedingly discrete and not at all territorial. And when I wish to be, I can be difficult to find. All these things combine to earn my safety, if nothing else."

Winters nodded, and thumbed the engine to life. As he pulled away, I waved casually before making my way to bed, below ground and safe from the sun. Winters was an able opponent, and I had enjoyed our games immensely.

It was too bad there was so much sadness in the world, I thought to myself. Neither Winters nor Croydon would sleep easily for years to come. I settled in for a dreamless sleep, the easy rest of a bureaucrat secure in his position and his place in the world. ☹

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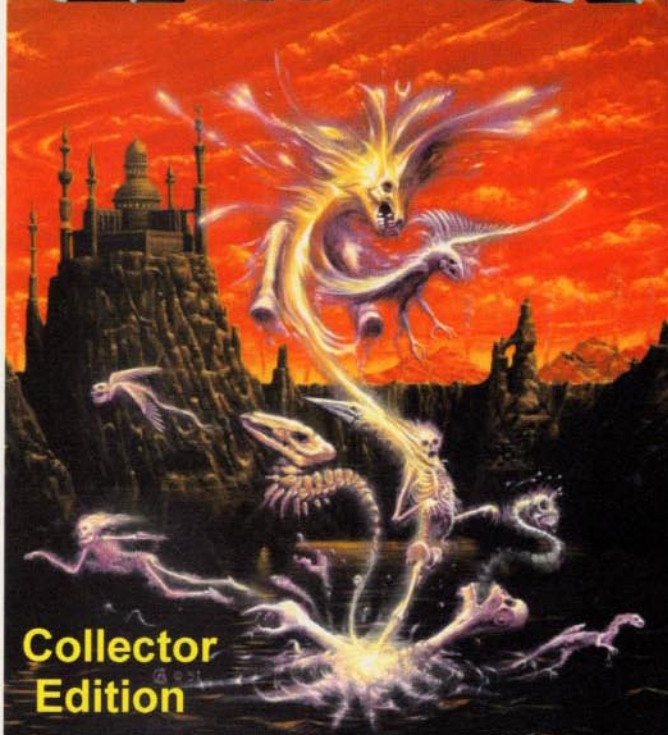
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Fans of the DC/Vertigo comic *Hellblazer* are jumping for joy. The punk rocker turned magus finally has a voice in *Sorcerer*, White Wolf's newest World of Darkness sourcebook. Now you may be asking, "Don't they have an entire game based on mages already?" The fact of the matter is, *Mage* and *Sorcerer* are worlds apart. *Mage* is White Wolf's most ambitious game, delving into the nature of reality itself; *Sorcerer* has no such pretensions.

That doesn't mean that *Sorcerer* is "Mage Light," it's just more in tune with the traditional theories of magic that are found in esoteric books of forbidden lore. The theme of *Mage* is to aspire to Ascension, a grand awakening of the sleeping soul. Sorcerers are just trying to get by without getting gobbled by a Kindred or Garou.

Sorcerer is a darker game than *Mage*, a meaner game than *Mage*, and probably a stronger game than *Mage* as well. Mages can usually use their reality shattering magick to get out of any mess. A Sorcerer has to use his wits, call in some metaphysical favors with other supernatural creatures and make some deals with some real nasty devils in order to survive. It's "old school magic" not "new age magick" and that's a fine cup of tea.

The book begins with five major cults (or "orders") for a Sorcerer to belong to. The first group is the Ancient Order of the Aeon Rights, a take off on the Order of the Golden Dawn. The second, the Balamob, are White Wolf's token nod to the non-Anglo shaman. The next – the Nephite Priests – are spiced up Templars done with a Mormon twist. The Thal'han base their magic on sound, and the Uzoma are... White Wolf's token nod to the non-Anglo shaman. Again. These are given as examples of orders rather than the definitive list, and to be honest, I'm glad. I'm a solo sorcerer at heart... which by the way, was conspicuous by its absence. White Wolf has always been good about presenting rules for "solo" characters, but it's missing here. There are some keen "minor" groups (I'm particularly fond of the Fenian and Seven Thunders), but again, I miss that Sorcerer who had to learn it the hard way: by himself.

However, the character creation chapter is very complete, thorough, and easy to use. There's even a section describing what happens when a Sorcerer "awakens" and becomes a Mage (or gets Embraced and becomes a Vampire). Like other mortals, the Sorcerer begins with slightly lower Attributes (6/4/3) and Skills

(11/7/4) but more Freebie Points (21) and 5 points to spend on "magical paths." These paths resemble Vampiric Disciplines and Garou Gifts, but with a much more sorcerous feel. There's Alchemy, Conjuraction, Conveyance, Cursing, Divination, Enchantment, Ephemera (communicating with the spirit world), Fascination ("charming" someone), Healing, Hellfire, Herbalism/Brewing, Shadows, Shapeshifting, Summoning and Binding, and Weathercraft. It's a wide selection to choose from, and each captures the feel with a voice of authority.

There are also a few more Archetypes (the Crackerjack is particularly neat), new Talents, Skills, Backgrounds (mostly stolen from other White Wolf games), and a whole slew of new and keen Advantages and Disadvantages (over four pages worth).

The layout and format of the book are also of high quality. Everything is cross-indexed and easy-to-find, and there are a ton of tables after each section, re-explaining the rules of each section. It's a great format, and well-appreciated. I should also mention that the White Wolf art department has been upping it's standards lately. I don't read a lot of White Wolf books, but with each one I do read, the quality of art gets better and better.

To top it off, there's a two page bibliography in the back along with notes on each book. Just a little touch of class that I look for when I pick up a game supplement these days. In the past, some White Wolf Bibliographies were a little hoaky, but I'm glad they're taking these endpages a bit more seriously these days.

Sorcerer is *Mage*'s dirty, chain-smoking, foul-mouthed little brother. Like I said above, it's old school magic rather than new age magick, and that's right up my alley. I always judge a game by my desire to photocopy the character sheet in the back. Well, I've already done that, and I've played my *Sorcerer* twice already. It's been a long time coming, but it's well worth the wait.

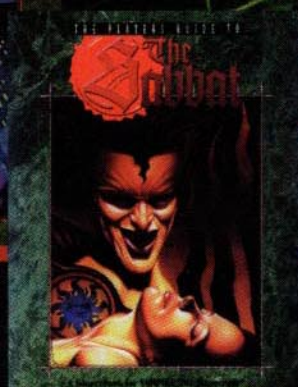
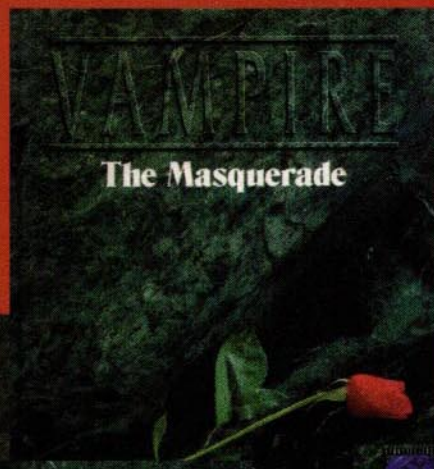
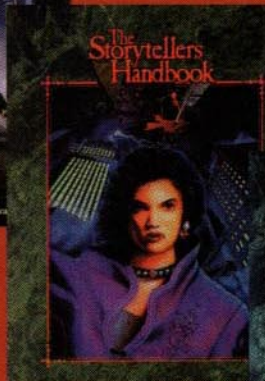
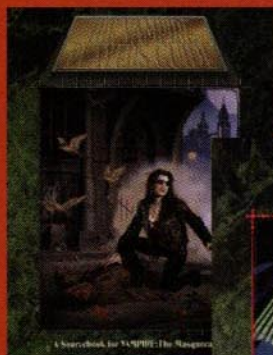


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