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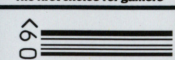
Expert strategy from "Sir" Billy Harms

PLUS

THE 10 SEXIEST GAMES OF ALL TIME...OH YEAH!

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EXCLUSIVE!
"TheVede"
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VAMPIRE BLOODLINES

Embrace
the dark
side
of the
Half-Life 2
engine

THE RPG APOCALYPSE

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10 SEXIEST GAMES
OF ALL TIME...OH YEAH!

COVER STORY

46 Vampire: The Masquerade — Bloodlines

The White Wolf pen-and-paper sensation is *finally*
getting the treatment it deserves, courtesy of the
Half-Life 2 Source engine and the RPG gurus at Troika
Games. We were granted exclusive, top-secret access
to the game that could shatter genre conventions by
presenting a thrilling and unique RPG experience
from a first-person perspective. Prepare yourself for
what could be a new benchmark in gaming.
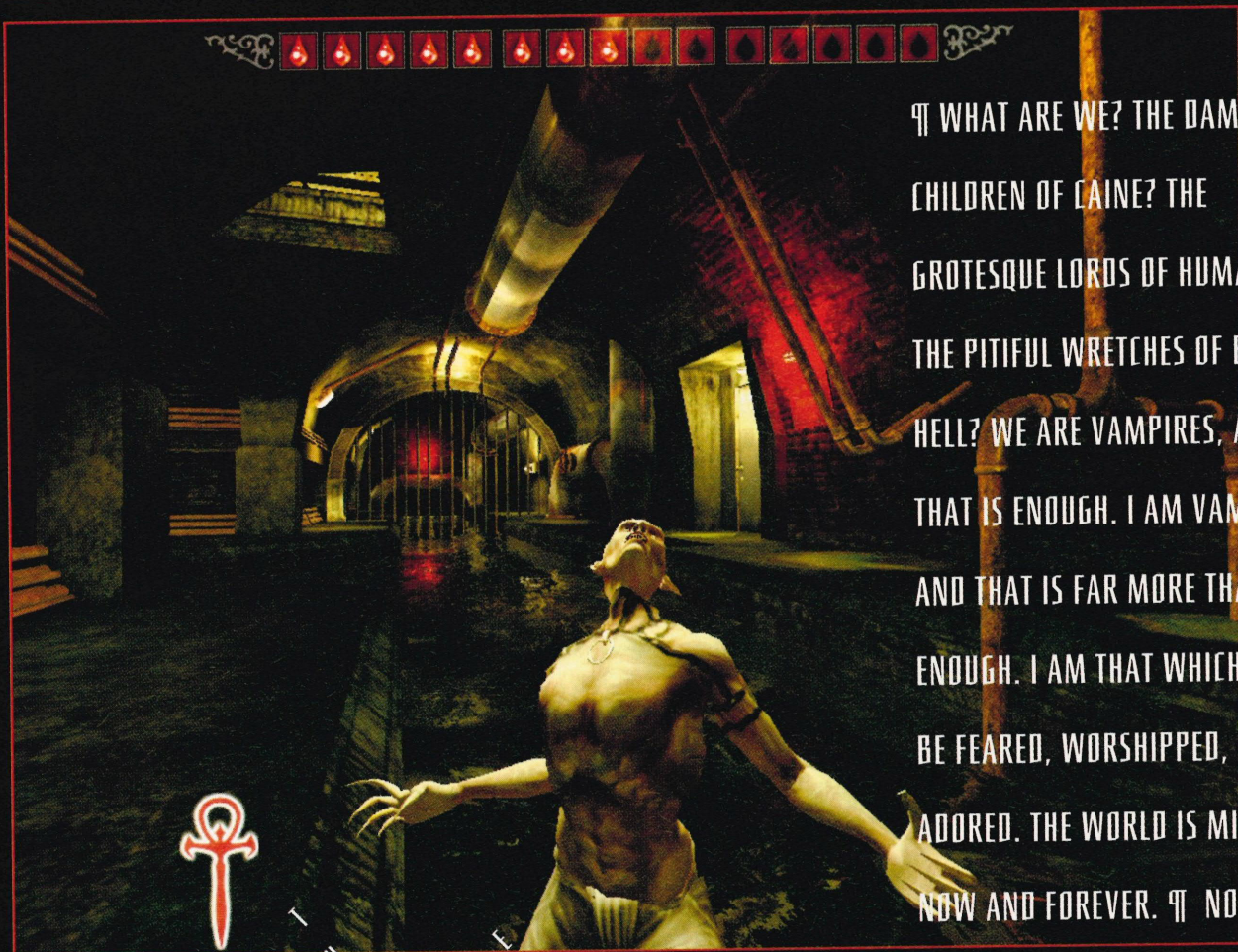
¶ WHAT ARE WE? THE DAMNED CHILDREN OF CAINE? THE GROTESQUE LORDS OF HUMANITY? THE PITIFUL WRETCHES OF ETERNAL HELL? WE ARE VAMPIRES, AND THAT IS ENOUGH. I AM VAMPIRE, AND THAT IS FAR MORE THAN ENOUGH. I AM THAT WHICH MUST BE FEARED, WORSHIPPED, AND ADORED. THE WORLD IS MINE – NOW AND FOREVER. ¶ NO ONE HOLDS COMMAND OVER ME. NO MAN. NO GOD. NO PRINCE.

– FROM THE VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE PEN-AND-PAPER GAME

THE VAMPIRE MASQUERADE

BLOO

BY CHUCK OSBORN

OLINES

THE HALF-LIFE 2 ENGINE GETS DEAD SEXY

The Tzimisce, or fleshcrafters, are known as the cruelest of the Sabbat vampires, assembling monstrous creations out of dead bodies. This boss-ette (who we'll call "Gash-y") tosses corpses as weapons. Ewww...

1 | 148

e really want to be in-your-face with the immediacy of *Bloodlines*," states Leonard Boyarsky, Troika's joint CEO and art director.

When you get right down to it, what's more *immediate* than portraying a free-spirited denizen of the undead? In Troika's *Vampire: The Masquerade — Bloodlines*, a faithful tabletop-to-PC translation of White Wolf's ungodly successful pen-and-paper roleplaying game, you get the chance to sink your fangs into the juicy role of literature's most romantic, powerful creation. There's action, magic, gothic sensuality, killer wardrobes — oh, and the most advanced graphics and physics engine on the planet courtesy of Valve's Source engine. So what's not to love?

Try not being able to talk about your baby for a year and a half. The downside of adopting the

Half-Life 2 engine for use in this first-person RPG is that Troika was forced to work on *Bloodlines* in virtual secrecy until Valve opened the PR floodgates on its own super-sequel. And then there are memories of that *first Vampire*-licensed game in 2000, Nihilistic's *Vampire: The Masquerade — Redemption*, a spotty effort that left a bitter taste in some fans' mouths until patching toned down the difficulty and added unlimited saves. (Don't worry: Troika is a firm believer in unrestricted saving in its games.)

YOUR SO-CALLED NEW LIFE

SET IN A GOTH-PUNK TWISTED mirror of modern-day Los Angeles, *Bloodlines* begins, appropriately enough, with your death. Recently human, you're seduced in an alleyway off L.A.'s Sunset Strip and "embraced" — White Wolf terminology for turned undead — by a rogue vampire. As a new offspring of Caine (the first vampire), you'll then pick from

one of seven different clans to join. But your mere existence is a no-no.

It turns out that all is not well in the post-afterlife. According to *Vampire: TM* lore, every city is ruled by the Camarilla, a secret governmental body instituted by the seven major vampire clans. Each city is led by a prince; only he can give permission to sire new vampires. Los Angeles, however, had grown to exist as an Anarch Free State, a lawless city where vampires did what they pleased.

The game starts with the Camarilla re-establishing its presence in L.A. As an unauthorized convert (your sire has already been killed), you're brought before the new prince and given a choice: become his pawn or die. But soon an ancient artifact appears in the city, and as the clans struggle for control of it, you get the chance to

NAME: Ventrue
POWERS: Dominate, Fortitude, Presence
LIKES: Aristocratic protocol
ANSWERS TO: "Count"

CATEGORY: Action/ RPG **DEVELOPER:** Troika **PUBLISHER:** Activision **RELEASE DATE:** Q2/Q3 2004

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE: Put simply, Troika knows roleplaying. This hotshot studio was founded by the team that created *Fallout* — one of the most revered RPGs of all time — and it developed *Arcanum*, which won *PC Gamer*'s Best RPG of 2001 award. Also, *Bloodlines* is the first game outside of Valve's offices to use the spanking-new Source engine that powers *Half-Life 2*. And it's got vampires.

"Welcome to my subterranean bungalow. Mind the cobwebs."

Sexy, yes, but she's got a wicked snake fetish.
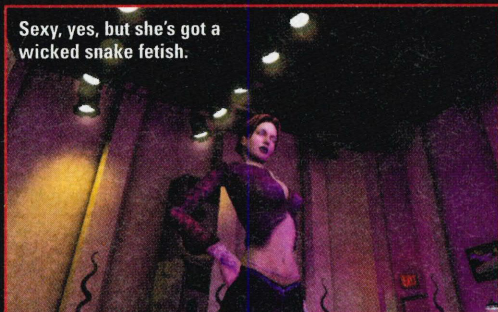
Some humans are hip to the vampire community.

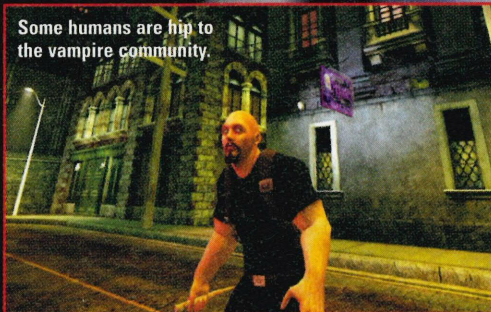determine how your destiny will unfold. Do you rise up through the ranks of the Camarilla? Fight to restore anarchy? Or join an underground (pun intended) vampire movement to radically change the future of L.A.'s bloodsucking community? Besides developing your skills, your goal is to help establish the city's power structure.

"*Vampire* is all about political scheming," says Boyarsky, explaining the lasting appeal of the mythology. Machinations in the world will take place in four main hubs — Hollywood, Los Angeles, Chinatown, and Santa Monica.

Bloodlines continues *Vampire*'s thickly laden tale of pointy-toothed bureaucracy: The central premise of the *Vampire* universe is that vampires must conceal their existence from humanity. "The 'Masquerade' is the need to maintain the appearance of just being any human," says *Bloodlines*' lead artist and designer, Chad Moore, "because if humans figure out that there are actually vampires, they would hunt them down and kill them."

Consequently, revealing your supernatural origins to a mortal turns other vamps against you. "One of the things that we're doing differently from the first game [*Redemption*] is that there won't be a lot of battles against other vampires," continues Boyarsky. Since there

are very few vampires in the world compared to humans, "it's a [heavy] food-to-hunter ratio." However, breaking the rules does carry consequences.

"Vampires get very upset with you if you run around baring your fangs," notes Boyarsky. "[They'll] warn you to stop and then get a little more…*insistent* after a while."

DEAD LIKE ME

KEEPING YOUR VAMPIRIC NATURE HIDDEN can be even more of a challenge depending on which of the seven clans you've joined. Each of the Kindred groups has unique skills and disciplines (magical abilities), as well as cultural and visual differences based loosely on real-world pop culture.

For example, readers of Anne Rice novels may gravitate toward the Toreador, the gauntly ethereal style-hounds who have little trouble "passing" for human. More into the rough-and-tumble action style of the *Blade* universe? Try the muscular brawler Brujah on for size. And if you're into the classics, you can even inhabit the pitifully grotesque visage of the Nosferatu, a bat-eared ghoul so ghastly that he has to slink in the darkness to avoid being seen by humans.
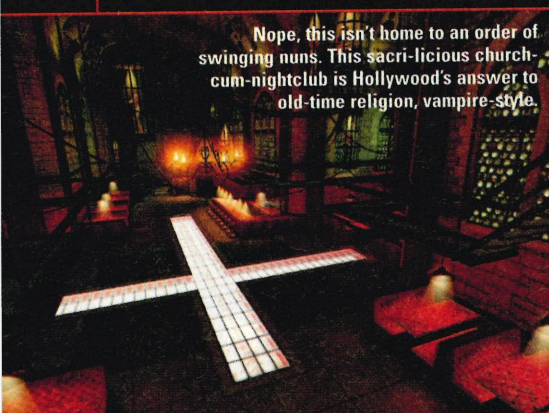
NAME: Brujah

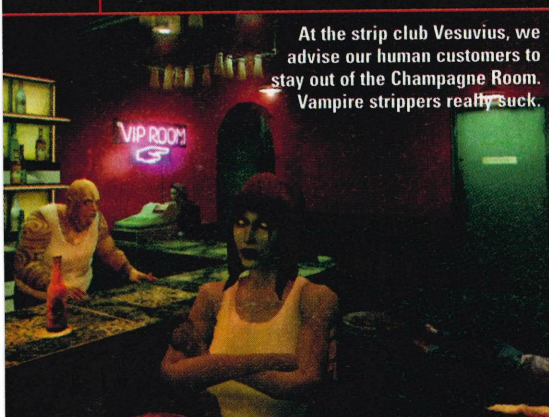POWERS: Celerity, Potence, Presence

LIKES: Gangbanging

DISLIKES: Being asked if they were in The Lost Boys

I do not like Malkavians in a hat, I do not like Malkavians as a bat. Bitch, where my money, sweet as golden honey?

Nope, this isn't home to an order of swinging nuns. This sacri-licious church-cum-nightclub is Hollywood's answer to old-time religion, vampire-style.

At the strip club Vesuvius, we advise our human customers to stay out of the Champagne Room. Vampire strippers really suck.

Other clans include the Ventrue (Dracula wannabes who excel at mind control), the Malkavians (nonsense-spewing madmen), the Gangrel (long-haired, animalistic fighters), and the Tremere (practitioners of Thaumaturgy, or blood magic.)

Bloodlines' in-game character sheet is a carbon-copy of the one used in the pen-and-paper game. Statistics are broken out into five levels of a wide variety of attributes, abilities, talents, skills, knowledges, virtues, and disciplines ranging from the social (charisma, appearance) and mental (intelligence, wits) to learned abilities like medicine, etiquette, subterfuge, and linguistics. Troika promises that the system will appeal to power-tweakers and casual gamers alike; you'll be able to fiddle with the stats manually or simply select a pre-determined history for your character (such as All-Star Athlete) that automatically refines the settings and disperses experience points appropriately.

Being a vampire, you'll need blood to survive — and the most readily available source will be the human NPCs wandering the world. Just be sure to leave them a little — killing a human is viewed as a "Masquerade" transgression. The more you kill, the more monstrous you become, driving your "humanity" bar down and sending you ever closer to a mindless frenzy.

As in *Redemption*, blood is the source of your power. Magical spells (disciplines) can be cast using hemoglobin gravy as replenishable mana, and include the White Wolf standards of Auspex (telepathy), Celerity (super-speed), Dominate (mind control), Obfuscate (invisibility), Potence (vampiric strength), and Presence (emotional manipulation.) In addition, some clans have access to Feats, or natural skills, that influence the behavior of others and don't require the expenditure of blood. These include persuasion, leadership, and seduction.

WELCOME TO THE SLAYGROUND

"THE REAL FUN [OF BLOODLINES] is in *being* a vampire," Boyarsky tells us, "and using your powers to get through situations we're going to be putting you in."

Make no mistake: Though you can outfit yourself with a lethal arsenal of authentic weapons (*The Encyclopedia of Modern Military Weapons* sits casually on artist Chris Ashton's desk), *Bloodlines* is *not* a first-person shooter. If you try to blow your way through the game with a pistol, stake gun, or flamethrower —
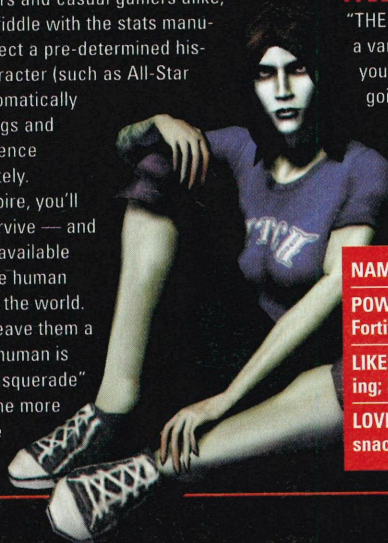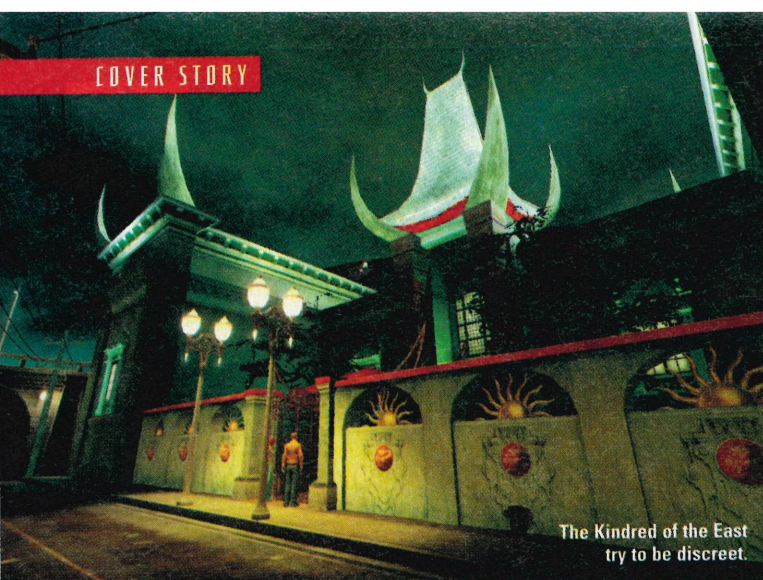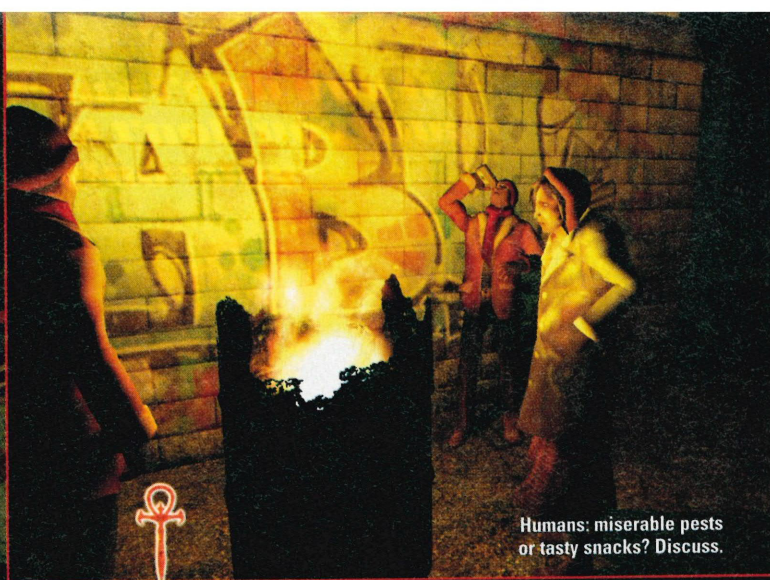
NAME: Gangrel

POWERS: Animalism, Fortitude, Protean
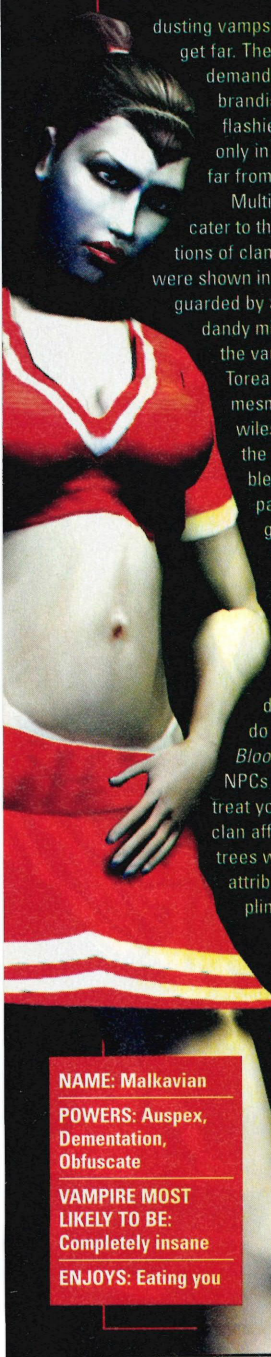
LIKES: Shape-shifting; licking self

LOVES: Scooby snacks

The Kindred of the East try to be discreet.

Humans: miserable pests or tasty snacks? Discuss.

dusting vamps and humans alike — you won't get far. The "Masquerade" system demands that you keep a low profile, brandishing guns and using your flashier "Hey, I'm a vampire!" abilities only in emergencies or in encounters far from the eyes of pesky mortals.

Multiple pathways past obstacles will cater to the differing abilities and limitations of clan characters. One example we were shown involved getting into a warehouse guarded by an oafish rent-a-cop. A Ventrue dandy might mind-zap him into thinking the vampire was expected, while a Toreador vixen may prance over and mesmerize with her bouncing feminine wiles. Avoiding direct confrontation, the Nosferatu could use Obfuscate to blend into the shadows and sneak past. (Incidentally, *no* amount of jiggling will help a Nosferatu she-honey: while gender can positively influence some interactions, butt-ugly is still butt-ugly.)

"One thing that Troika has always prided itself on is giving the player lots of options, both in dialogue and in the things you can do in the game," notes Moore, and *Bloodlines* is no exception. All the NPCs you encounter in the game will treat you differently depending on your clan affiliation and gender, and dialogue trees will branch depending on your attributes, and in some cases, disciplines (such as Domination).

Unlike many other licensed games, everything that happens in *Bloodlines* will become a part of the established *Vampire: TM* universe. Troika worked closely with White Wolf to guarantee the accuracy of *Bloodlines'* storyline, gameplay, and stat system, and conversely, the game will feature insider nods for longtime *Vampire* players, such as the inclusion of "celebrities" like grizzled Anarch leader Smiling Jack.

In addition to the opposing Camarilla and Anarch factions, a few other splinter groups vie for unholy leadership in Los Angeles. First, there's the Sabbat, scabby rebels against the Masquerade system who strive to reduce humanity to the status of cattle. Humans are food to them, pure and simple. Or consider the Giovanni — "bad" vampire necromancers who live in a mansion that doubles as a mausoleum. You'll also meet the Kindred of the East (also known as the Kuei-jin): mystic shape-changing vampires of Asian descent who feed off the chi, or spirit essence, of their prey.

Troika is shooting for roughly 40 to 60 hours of gameplay in *Bloodlines*, and depending on your decisions and actions over the course of the game, you may end up working for any of the factions. (Or maybe none of them. Expect multiple endings.)

In addition to the main storyline, optional side-quests may pop up, although probably not the same ones for every clan. (Again, Nosferatu is butt-ugly: don't expect that withered matron to come calling on Bat-boy when her kids have gone missing.)

And as they say in Ronco commercials, that's not all! Troika's incorporating plenty of secrets to uncover in your quest to become the ultimate vampire. For example, if you have an advanced Feat of Investigation, you may be able to see secret doors that'd go unnoticed by far less observant vampires.

THE SOURCE OF ALL EVIL

AS TROIKA'S PREMIER ENTRY in the first-person RPG world, *Bloodlines* needed to have a superlative graphics and physics engine to bring this macabre

Masquerade Mythology
FACTS AND FICTION OF VAMPIRE: TM LORE

NAME A BOOK, MOVIE, OR TV show about vampires, and it'll have its own unique laws governing the domain of the undead. *Vampire: The Masquerade* is no exception. Here's the FAQ on these tabletop-game bloodsuckers.

■ Vampires must drink blood to survive: True. Blood (preferably human blood) is the source of a vampire's strength.

■ Sunlight kills vampires: True. The sun turns vamps into crispy critters. They are generally nocturnal creatures.

■ Vampires hate garlic and running water: False. Yet another myth perpetuated by Dracula's PR machine.

■ Vampires are repulsed/burned by crosses (or other holy symbols): Mostly false. Despite what you see on Buffy, only someone with devout faith can hurt a vamp by brandishing a crucifix.

■ You can kill vampires with a stake through the heart: False…although they'll be paralyzed until the stake is removed.

■ Anyone bit by a vampire turns into one: False. Humans can be "embraced" (turned) only if all of their blood is drained and they're then fed a bit of the attacking vampire's blood. Otherwise, they're just stiffs with a terminal hickey.

When animated in *Half-Life 2*'s Source engine, the bartender at the Vesuvius can convey his emotions without saying a word. In these shots, is that a stake in his pocket or is he just happy to see you?

NAME: Malkavian

POWERS: Auspex, Dementation, Obfuscate

VAMPIRE MOST LIKELY TO BE: Completely insane

ENJOYS: Eating you

In one mission, you'll have to infiltrate the mansion belonging to The Society of Leopold, a dedicated collective of human vampire hunters.

world of vampires to pale un-life. Enter the Source engine — the same powerhouse technology at the heart of *Half-Life 2* — and its stellar property-based physics, realistic facial animations, and easy-as-pie lip-synching.

Adapting the Source engine to a roleplaying game was, as the experts put it, a no-brainer. However, the needs of a first-person shooter mostly set during the day didn't completely fit the requirements of a gloomy RPG in which your character sizzles to death in direct sunlight. So the Source particle and lighting engines were rewritten to more easily accommodate night-time environments and to enhance the look of supernatural spell effects. (Says Boyarsky: "If you fight another vampire, you're going to experience a *major* battle.")

A brand-new cloth system was likewise implemented to realistically render the movement of fabric and clothing. (That's a big plus for the Malkavians and their sashaying Liberace-meets-the-Cat in the Hat pimp duds. And as a whiteboard "to do" list in Troika's office highlighted, that cloth technology doubles to power the "jiggle" of the well-endowed female NPCs). Plus, with melee combat in mind, the option to play in a third-person perspective was thrown into the mix.

And finally, an RPG system had to be added so that your character's skills can improve with experience. For example, squeezing off submachine gun

rounds with pinpoint accuracy will be possible only with a high level of Firearms skill: if you're not skilled enough, you may as well be flinging garlic cloves. That's one trick Valve didn't have to ponder when Gordon returned to active duty.

But as in *Half-Life 2*, object-oriented physics will play a huge part in puzzle-solving. You'll be able to lift objects and throw them (if, of course, your a-vamp-tar is strong enough), blow apart anything made of wood, and potentially recycle metal cast-offs as bulletproof shields. What other stunts will players discover with, say, a barrel and a flamethrower? *Bloodlines*' developers are eager to see what creative-minded players can do.

COUNTER-STAKE

ONE TOPIC NOTICEABLY ABSENT from the early details of *Bloodlines* has been its multiplayer game. Well, here's the word from the developers — the game does have one.

While Troika is still polishing the specifics (including whether a humanity bar or the Masquerade system will be incorporated), the short story is that the team-based multiplayer mode will pit vampires against the all-too-human vampire hunters, The Society of Leopold.

Each scenario will blend all-out shooting action with roleplaying by giving each team an objective to fulfill as in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*. Successive maps will be linked together by an ongoing storyline, and each fresh scenario will have new goals for the teams.

The vampire hunters will be able to choose from an assortment of dif-

NAME: Toreador

POWERS: Auspex, Celetrity, Obfuscate

LIKES: Fancy clothes, the nightlife, loves to boogy

ENJOYS: "No, I'm *not* gay: I'm a vampire."

ferent load-outs, composed of the best anti-undead weaponry a secret society can buy (like stake-launchers). The Leopolds will also have unique abilities to balance out the fact that they're normal men going up against supernatural creatures.

Vampires will, of course, have access to their natural clan-bred abilities and disciplines, dispersing experience points earned in a game on enhancing their powers or purchasing better weaponry. (Yes, vamps can wave guns, too, but their starting arsenal is limited to simple "pawn shop" rods.)

Either side can steal dropped weapons from the dead, and although ideas are still being batted around the office, chances are that some battles will be waged in civilian zones, forcing teams to engage each other in absolute secrecy…or break the rules of the Masquerade.

"We enjoy the night, the darkness, where we can do things that aren't acceptable in the light. Night is when we slake our thirst." — Vampire's Kiss

The children of Caine are coming. Their power will be yours. Are you up to the task? Good night. **PCG**

YOU SUCK: THE CONTEST

You've read the story; now be *in* the game. All we need is your mug shot and your contact details, and we'll randomly select one lucky winner. What happens next? Your mug will be scanned right into the game to live for eternity in *Vampire: TM — Bloodlines*. Will your face suck or be sucked? We ain't telling…you'll have to play the game to find out. So send your mug shots no later than Sept 30th, 2003 to *makemeavampire@pcgamer.com.* (Full rules on page 127.)