Superheroes!

Interview with Steve Kenson ... Reviews of V&V, Marvel SH, Champions, DC Heroes, Mutants & Masterminds and more! ... Angel de Fantasma Short Story ... Federal Investigation of Superheroes (FISH) ... United We Stand Campaign Setting ... Super Squadron Updates ... Verge Designer's Notes ... Superhero NPCs for Marvel and Champions ... Freedom Force CRPG ... Movie Reviews: Batman v Superman, X-Men Apocalypse

RPG REVIEW

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ADMINISTRIVIA

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Editorial and Letters

Faster than a speeding bullet .. yes, it’s another issue of RPG Review as we rapidly play catch-up with our published and actual dates of release. Sticking to a voluntary 64 page journal is not always easy apparently - OK, so we’ve been plagued from the start with getting issues out on time, but we’re in full swing now, and will power along to get Issue 31 out in the near future.

This issue has a special dedication to superheroes. As I’ve said in a previous review (DC Heroes) the genre is not entirely my kettle of fish on a personal level, although when I think back on it I have played and run an awful lot of superhero RPG sessions, at least one setting and story having made it into RPG Review in the past (see RPG Reviews issues 4 and 5), although that was in a sense a demigod level fantasy campaign, which I suppose is a type of supers.

It was quite recently that fellow RPG Review Co-operative committee member and sometimes editor of this journal informed me about what was particularly enticing about superhero RPGs, and that’s when the penny dropped. It is the sheer scope and scale of characters and situations that the characters find themselves in that the game system must be sufficiently robust in design. Of course he said in less and in better words than I did, but you get the gist. Genre aficionado aside a working superhero game is the ultimate in game system design.

Thus in this issue of RPG Review we start with an interview with none other than Steve Kenson, the designer of what
has been the most popular superhero RPG of the 21st century, Mutants and Masterminds. Following this is a set of reviews by yours truly; specifically Superhero 2044, Villians and Vigilantes, Marvel Super Heroes, Champions/Hero System, Godsend Agenda, and Mutants and Masterminds. It is a set of reviews that is historical, covers the three most popular superhero RPG systems (at least according to the RPG.net straw poll of 2011; https://forum.rpg.net/showthread.php?572608-greatest-superhero-rpg-ever-and-why/), and some diverse approaches in design.

Following this is a short story by Michael Keegan, an absolute cracker. We occasionally have stories in RPG Review when it strongly suits the topic of the issue, and this one certainly fits that category. This is followed by a short example organisation piece by Alex Davis for Villains and Vigilantes, which has a couple of clever puns included. After that there is two articles by Karl Brown for a Mutants and Masterminds campaign, United We Stand, where the narrative tension should be fairly evident in the title.

Australia was also home of a superhero game and supplements which attracted some attention in its day, Super Squadron. We have a short piece from its author, Joe Italiano who tells us he's is working on a second edition - after some thirty years from the first! Also from an Australian perspective and from the RPG Review Cooperative itself is the designer's notes for Verge by Nic Moll, which has a couple of unique features worth looking at.

Way back in the early 1990s there was an RPG club in Perth, the Murdoch Alternative Reality Society, and they were rather fond of superhero games, or at least they especially were in 1992. Long hidden away in that club's annual are two NPCs which became the stuff of legend - Dr. Destroyer, who turned many Champions assumptions around, and Captain Carrot, a Marvel SH character with a notorious cuteness attack. We thank Colin Clark and Belinda Lee respectively for allows these characters of legend a new life.

Wrapping up the issue is our non-TTRPG reviews, starting off with Andrew Pam's review of the Freedom Force superhero computer RPGs. Andrew, I believe, will be taking up a more regular writing role with RPG Review on computer games and this is a very welcome first piece. Finally we have long-standing and ever vigilant Andrew Moshos, telling us what material is currently the silver screen in the superhero genre; specifically Batman v Superman and X-Men Apocalypse.

Taking a very different tack the next issue of RPG Review will be dedicated to the "Old School Revolution", where budding designers around the world have taken an approach that is both nostalgic and investigative of RPGs that were simpler and more direct than many of the more expressive newer games. There is also something coming out very soon which was long considered an item of humour. So gentle reader, if you have an old school review, scenario, or NPC, or design that you wish to publish, do let us know and let us know quickly because we intend to get it out very quickly.

Until then.. Everyone, be a hero!

Lev Lafayette, lev@rpgreview.net

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RPG Review Cooperative News

Although it is a relatively short time since the last RPG Review journal, the Cooperative has been very busy in implementing its objectives.

We've continued with our monthly newsletter, Crux Australi, and our monthly movie nights for those based where our Association is founded (Melbourne, Australia). We continue to operate our Github for design, operate an online store for members to sell their surplus gaming items, and advertise existing game sessions organised by members. Our members library has grown with several benefactors now making generous donations.

As mentioned in the last newsletter we have also engaged in our advocacy role of promoting an Open Game License for 4th edition Dungeons and Dragons and most recently we took on the opinions of our members and associates in raising the question of whether a new version of Watership Down should be produced with less violence (a related side association with RPGs being Bunnies and Burrows).

Last issue, as we went to the press (in the virtual sense) we has applied for the RPG Review journal to receive an International Standard Serial Number from the National Library of Australia - this was granted extremely quickly, probably something to do with having already been in existence for six years or so. Quite clearly we are running a serial and its not going away in a hurry!

Furthermore however, in the past week the RPG Review Cooperative has undertaken a bulk purchase of International Standard Book Numbers, which will allow members to purchase these standard classifiers are a heavily discounted rate and have their material published in the name of the Cooperative. This will include the superhero game, Verge, the third edition of Swordbearer entitled Spirit and Sword, the well-playtested Gulliver's Trading Company, The Eclipse Phase Companion, and The Laundry Down Under.

The most remarkable aspect of this young Cooperative is how quickly we have developed. When the Association was formed last year it established its modest goals. It has, after a mere six months in existence, achieved every single one of the tasks that it set itself at that meeting. We have our membership base, we have our online store, our library, we've transferred the domain ownership and the journal ownership to the Cooperative, we have our ISSN and ISBNs and we've engaged in our advocacy.

What is next? Well that's a challenge for the committee. But it is reasonable to expect that in coming months we will see an expansion on the established services offered by the committee and a number of publications bearing the Cooperative's name.
Interview With Steve Kenson

with Steve Kenson

Steve Kenson is a contributing author of over two hundred RPG publications, starting with being a contributor to Torg’s Creatures of Orrosh (West End Games, 1992), and most famously as co-author of Silver Age Sentinels (Guardians of Order, 2002), and author of Mutants and Masterminds (Green Ronin, 2002), and co-author of Blue Rose (Green Ronin, 2005). In addition Steve has written material for A Song of Ice and Fire, Changeling, Earthdawn, Exalted, GURPS, Icons, In Nomine, Mage, Pathfinder, Shadowrun, and Vampire. In addition he is an author of several RPG-related noves, including for Shadowrun and Mechwarrior.

Hi Steve, welcome to RPG Review.

Thanks, a pleasure to talk to you.

Let us start with a common question, how did become involved in roleplaying games? What were the first games you played and what did you think of them? What are you playing now? How has your gaming groups changed over the years?

I got started when I discovered the 1st edition gray box of Gamma World when I was in middle school and begged my parents to buy it for me. I talked a couple of friends into rolling up characters and we romped around ruins fighting mutants and such. When we exhausted the available Gamma World adventures, we dimension-gated our characters into Greyhawk and played through Hidden Shrine of Tamoachan with our blaster-wielding mutants! A shift to playing more Dungeons & Dragons followed, along with trying out nearly every game in the TSR catalog, along with quite a few others. I kicked-off a Marvel Super-Heroes game in high school that lasted through college and some time thereafter, although it transitioned to become a Champions game (our “college experimentation,” as it were).

In fact, my high school and college gaming group remains partially intact: two members of my current group have been gaming together since high school, four of us since college, with two members added in the years since. Of course, now we’re middle-aged, some with kids, and a good deal busier than we were in our teens and 20s, so our gaming transitioned to monthly quite some time ago when weekly get-togethers stopped being an option. After finishing up a D&D playtest game (for Out of the Abyss) and an Icons superhero game, we’re currently playing Tianxia from Vigilance Press, by my Green Ronin colleague Jack Norris. It’s been a blast!

Mutants and Masterminds is a game which revolutionised superhero RPGs, winning an extraordinary collection of awards, including the ENnie Best Game Award in 2006. It continues to have enduring popularity. What do you think are the features that made Mutants and Masterminds so popular?

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I’m not so sure M&M “revolutionized” superhero RPGs so much as brought together a lot of the things I liked in superhero RPGs, a lot of my experience in running and playing (and writing for) them, and combined them with some of the core, recognizable elements of the d20 System, which was quickly becoming the “common ingredient” in the hobby and industry at the time. From the feedback I’ve received, fans enjoy the combination of flexible, yet reasonably detailed, hero creation options combined with quick-playing mechanics for running the game. It certainly didn’t hurt that Green Ronin’s products were also top-notch in terms of their visual presentation, with great color artwork and layout, since I think superheroes kind of demand that sort of treatment.

You have a quite a range of author credits, ranging across different genres, systems, and publishers. Have you encountered any difficulties in working with such a range, or do have a consistent thread throughout?

I’m a bit less of an RPG polymath than I used to be. I eagerly devoured new game systems in my teens and 20s but, as time has gone on, I find new games and products have to work harder to gain my attention and space on my groaning bookshelves, which I imagine is the case for a lot of gamers of my generation. Still, I like a broad variety of genres and styles of RPGs, so I don’t usually have any problems working with different ones. It can make a nice change of pace from time to time. The tricky part can be deciding whether or not to invest the time to get sufficiently “fluent” in a new system to work on it professionally, if it is likely to only be a small project or contribution.

What do you rate among your material as among your best? Conversely, are there any publications and contributions that you’re less than happy with?

Honestly, I try not to rate my work, rest on my laurels, or beat myself up for my mistakes (of which I’ve made my share). I’m always looking forward to the next project or idea to work on rather than looking back on the things that I’ve done. I think my work speaks for itself and I know of instances where some project I’ve loathed has been someone’s favorite and conversely some things I’ve written that I’m quite proud of that some people hate. That’s how it is with creative work of any kind, really.

I’m certainly quite fond of my work on Freedom City for Mutants & Masterminds, and everything that became the seeds for what is now the Earth-Prime Universe, with Emerald City, the Atlas of Earth-Prime, and all of the space and dimensional stuff from Cosmic Handbook. I also look back quite fondly on my work for Shadowrun, as I was (and remain) a big fan of the Sixth World setting.

Income through freelance or even in-house game design is not exactly known for being a path to riches. What’s your day job, if any?

I don’t have “a” day job. I work for Green Ronin Publishing as a staff designer, run Ad Infinitum Adventures (my own imprint, which publishes Icons Superpowered Roleplaying), am the managing partner of Copper Cauldron Publishing—a New Age and metaphysical imprint I co-founded—and I still do some freelance work from time to time as well.
From all of that, I have something resembling an income.

Superhero games can deal with a wide range of capabilities and provide an adaptable 'toolbox' for gamers to build things. These are features that make supers games good generic games able to handle multiple genres. Are there any plans to release other games built around MnM 3e for other genres?

Games? Probably not (at least, no plans at present) but something we’ve discussed is the potential for other settings for M&M that are different from the largely four-color superheroics of Earth-Prime, which would use the M&M rules to define characters of a different world, facing different challenges. The beauty of it is that, given the multiversal nature of superhero settings, that world—and many others—could well be “out there” and crossovers between settings would be possible, especially if they all use the same core rules-set to describe game play.

What are you working on these days? Where do you see the industry going?

Right now I’m finishing up with the new edition of Blue Rose for the Adventure Game Engine (AGE) System, which is a substantial product, as well as work for the Atlas of Earth-Prime and a new edition of the Freedom City sourcebook that updates its timeline and characters to the present day and the third edition of Mutants & Masterminds. I just released the Adversaries sourcebook for Icons, a collection of 80+ villains, and have another adventure or two in the works there. Various plans for things further out, but still in the vague planning stages.

The hobby game industry is growing an increasingly long tail from continued improvements in small press publishing and distribution, especially print-on-demand and electronic products, which allow many people—including me—to essentially run their own publishing businesses. Seems likely we’ll see small presses continue to proliferate, and hopefully innovate, while the holders of the big RPG properties like D&D and Pathfinder continue to produce product for the core of the market. I’ve no idea whether or not the tabletop games market has reached a “floor” or not in terms of its reach or popularity but, for now at least, the range of new publishing options seems to have led to a new wave of games and products. It’s a fairly golden time to be a gamer, in many regards.

You are also well known for founding and acting as volunteer facilitator for Nashua Outright, a social and support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning youth. What connections do you draw, if any, between your game designs and settings and being 'out and proud'? Have you experienced negative reactions from people in the industry or from fans? How do you think the hobby as a whole stands on this issue? What needs to change?

Ah, somebody has been reading my Wikipedia entry! Although my involvement with Outright was many years ago, I remain passionate about LGBTQ rights and visibility and related issues like gender and racial equality and representation. I don’t know that I draw a direct line between my experiences working with youth or advocating for civil rights and game design, but it certainly has made me more aware of the importance of inclusivity in the imaginative products we as designers produce. I recall how desperately I clung to any sort of positive or realistic portrayal of people like myself in the products of the hobby I loved and I think now of a new generation of gamers who naturally want to see themselves reflected in those imaginary worlds. So I try to make an effort to continue to educate myself, peel away my own biases, and remain dedicated to creating worlds where everyone gets their chance to be a hero and tell their story how they want.

Thanks Steve for your time!

My pleasure, thanks for the invitation!
Superhero 2044 (1977)

Superhero 2044 was the first roleplaying game of its genre, coming in a little late in the piece in 1977 and having been preceded not only by fantasy and science fiction games, as one would expect but even by games of the wild west, intelligent rabbits, and cavemen vs dinosaurs. The game itself comes in a colourful cardstock cover of various super characters by Mike Cagell and the mere 36 pages is saddle-stapled. The writing itself is clear, but the organisation of the text leaves a lot to be desired, as does much of the layout, although the three-column justified text was pretty hi-tech for those days. The book includes a good table of contents.

The game is set, as the name suggests in 2044 where, following a nuclear exchange, there have been various mutations leading to superpowers and a the north Pacific island city-state of Inguria (Shanter Island) has become the world power. Major technological advances include massive changes to battery efficiency, common organ transplants, near-sentient computers, sophisticated genetic screening, and alloplastics. For some extra spice, humanity has made contact with a peaceful alien species, the Formalhautians, whom some four million have been resettled on earth following disastrous climate change on their planet. The multinational and super-powered Science Police ensure global peace, supplanting The Freedom League of superheroes who were destroyed by the evil Dr. Ruby two years prior. Overall one has to say, the predictive setting is pretty damn fine for something written over thirty years ago.

Character design in Superhero 2044 consists of seven prime requisites; Vigor, Stamina, Endurance, Mentality, Charisma, Ego and Dexterity. The first three may seem a little similar in name, so to elucidate: Vigor is long-term health, Stamina is fighting ability and short-term wind and Endurance is effectively hit points. Stats are purchased with a point-buy system (the first?), with 140 points distributed among the seven prime requisites. These are further modified by the character's group (or class, if you like), being either a Unique (exotic human with paranormal powers e.g., Superman), a Toolmaster (normal technically proficient human with gadgets e.g., Iron Man) or Ubermensch (normal human at peak physical apex e.g., Tarzan). At the discretion of the referee an additional 50 points may be point into specific skills and powers. It is probably imperative that a character purchase an Endurance of 20 plus, otherwise they'll be constantly fatigued or worse. If they purchase a Vigor of less than 11, they will find themselves “unable to operate under normal conditions”. Worse still, none of the specific skills and powers are described, with merely the examples of the three sample characters for GMs to derive any idea.

The rest of the game system, such as it is, is combat, which is fought in ten-second rounds. There are four kinds of combat; direct physical, transformation, mental attacks and projectile attacks. For direct physical versus mental attacks, subtract the defensive bonus (stamina or ego) from the offensive bonus (ditto) and compare to a matrix which gives a target number on 3d6. An equal difference is a target number of 11, an advantage of 40+ is an automatic hit and a disadvantage of -31 or more requires an 18. For transformations the attacker rolls a die, modifies according to the type of target (human, alien, inanimate) and then rolls another die and tries to beat the number they initially rolled. The same procedure is also used for projectile attacks, however a third roll is made for hit location. Damage affects Endurance and Vigor, but at different values.

A large feature of the game (in this context seven pages) is "handicapping" scenarios where the character has an a score of 1-10 across eight categories (crime prevention, criminal location, stopping crime, capturing criminals, conviencing criminals, acquiring leads, collateral damage, and injury/capture potential). Players schedule their hero's activity in log sheets and the referee rolls on random tables to determine what crimes are occurring and the results of the crimes (including rewards) based on the type of crime and the character's handicap. Following this is three pages of income, expenditure and equipment prices.
Following the first printing of the rules, extra rules were added in the second printing. This includes two pages of a "synthetic scenario machine" for solo play, and seven pages of optional superhero rules written by other players. These include mastery in melee weapons, specialisation of handguns and rifles, some sample mental skills, agency fees, and alternative combat rules which have random damage determination.

Even in the genesis days of 1977, Superhero 2044 wasn't much of a game. With the exception of an average piece of cover art (and a couple of interior pieces) and some intelligible writing, the presentation, organisation and physical production are right at the bottom of the ladder. As for the game system itself, it is hopelessly underdeveloped and utterly inconsistent, with the experience of actual play is much more akin to bookkeeping than actual roleplaying. Not surprisingly, although it was the first SH RPG, it faded into almost complete obscurity with the arrival of games like Villains & Vigilantes and Champions.

Villains and Vigilantes (1979, 1982 revised)

Written in a dense 48 pages, the revised edition of Villains and Vigilantes is presented in a simple saddle-stapled booklet with cardstock cover and two-column sans-serif text. There's a solid single-page table of contents and the brevity justifies the lack of an index. Layout is surprisingly clear given the density of the text and simplicity of the formatting with simple page numbers. As can be expected, the writing style is clear but formal throughout.

Artistically, the front cover is presented like a comic cover, and the back cover makes provides a nice comic-book panel blurb about the game. The interior art is mainly filler except when directly referencing characters. Overall, it is simply but effective, showing acumen and some cleverness in style. The main chapters of the game are characters, combat, campaign creation, the government, being a superhero, and gamemastering, which can be conceptually differentiated as (a) Game System (b) Campaign Setting and (c) Game Advice.

In terms of character generation the game starts with alignment; all PCs are good, or villains are Evil, and only unintelligent animals can be Neutral. The exclusion on Evil characters is absolute; "If any GM has in his group a player who could be truly classified as evil, we can only wonder why that players should be allowed to participate at all". This apparently strange statement comes from an interesting feature of V&V; the players are the characters, plus superpowers. Likewise, the five basic characteristics, Strength, Endurance, Agility, Intelligence ("mental agility"), and Charisma with values from 3-18 assigned by the GM, based on what they think the player has in these characteristics. Powers and weaknesses however, are determined randomly although there is an option for self-selection. The characteristics, true the style of the era and the publishers, involved table lookups and calculations for modifications and various secondary characteristics, such as hit points (survival value), healing rates (recovery value), power points (energy level) etc.

Character powers are sometimes simultaneously ambiguous and specific. That is, each power is described as its own system but sometimes with vagaries within. The power descriptions are concrete rather than abstract (e.g., 'Flame Power' rather than 'Energy Blast'). Careful GM navigation and attention is required throughout and indeed, is expected (for example, the GM is expected to create whatever the PC chooses from their 'Animated Servant' power, 'Bionics' has very vague references to what these new mechanical body parts imply). This said however, a GM should be able to make their way as there is sufficient description in most cases to make the examples workable, especially with those powers (e.g., Disintegration Ray) that have a direct combat effect. Overall it's a solid list of powers, but by no means comprehensive, and quite unbalanced being based on random rolls ("I have Cosmic Awareness!" vs "Ummm.. I have a pet rat!").
Character progression is an experience points and level system, with experience gains based on the value of the villain captured and taken to the authorities, and for donating to charity, with an optional rule for bonus experience points for ingenious play during a session. Level gains provide the opportunity for training characteristics, combat ability, background education, animal training, or even weight loss or gain.

The combat system is round-based with initiative determined on 1d10+Agility, with an initial surprise check. For every 15 'phases' in a round the character can act based on their initiative score (e.g., a character with an Initiative of 36 could act on 36, 21, and 6), with additional actions costing power points. Attack actions are a d20-valued chance based on cross-referencing attack and defense powers on a table lookup, modifying for level, range, and facing – it's a little clunky, but the process itself is simple enough. Selected locations on targets can be achieved by a second 'to hit' roll, with various effects. A successful hit rolls with result in a damage roll, which can reduce hit points, be partially transferred to power points, and may cause knockback in true comic fashion. A character with no power points is out of energy and fatigued, with losses to movement, carrying capacity etc, a character with no hit points is unconscious, and a character reduced to zero hit points and power points is dead. Appended to the combat chapter is reaction and loyalty charts based on Charisma, which looks remarkably similar to those used in Dungeons and Dragons of a similar vintage.

Campaign information begins on selecting a setting (a good if short range across space and time with a heavy 20th century bias is provided) and populating it with organisations, including a couple of examples, such as the default law-enforcement organisation, C.H.E.S.S. (the Central Headquarters of Espionage for the Secret Service) with, unsurprisingly, chess piece metaphors for roles. Charts are provided for NPC generation, which the 'Origin' table certainly a cause for some unintended amusement (there are "Asian" and "Oriental" but no "Indian", for example). NPC knowledge areas are also included as a potential area of education for PCs on level gains. Tables are also provided for scenario generation, but also with some reasonable advice on linking adventures together and generating new situations and, as an act of genre reinforcement. "The best way to learn how things should happen in V&V is to read comic books".

Following this there is a chapter on 'The Government', which includes a very impressive summary of New York State laws at the time of publication, and the trial and imprisonment process – that's worth a dot point in 'substance' alone, and is useful as a template for a range number of campaign settings, even if the specifics differ significantly. Characters also have a legal status and security clearance which further reinforces the rule of law. It would be preferable if there were some more elaborate notes on the application in different settings, but even by itself and with its limited scope, it's a fair job.

The last two chapters are for player and GM advice respectively. The former elaborates on the feature of V&V in that they players are characters plus superpowers, that the characters can engage in merchandising, and can engage in a variety of gadgeteering or scientific breakthroughs etc. The GMs section has an example of play and some NPCs. There is also an Appendix which covers falling, structural points, a short bestiary, and a vehicle list. The comic-book code is reinforced again with the equipment description with a recommendations for penalties applied for characters who use equipment out of context.

Overall, this is not a great game but is one with a couple of very interesting ideas and resources – which makes its a little tricky to judge in aggregate. Rule-wise it's pretty clunky and not always fun in actual play, even if the concept is fine. The scope of the game is very limited to the particular subset of the classic superhero genre and doesn't really explore deviations far from that. Whilst there is a fair bit of a game in a relatively short space, it doesn't give a sense of completeness. All this considered V&V made an interesting contribution to RPGs and superhero RPGs in particular but is really something to experiment with for a few retrospective sessions in a contemporary context.

Style: 1 + .4 (layout) + .5 (art) + .4 (coolness) + .4 (readability) + .3 (product) = 3.0

Substance: 1 + .3 (content) + .7 (text) + .4 (fun) + .2 (workmanship) + .2 (system) = 2.8
Marvel Super Heroes (1984)

Introduction

Keeping up with the number of editions of Marvel Super Heroes requires a bit of a review in its own right. The product being reviewed here is the first edition core set from 1984. There was also an Advanced Set supplement which follows the same rules from 1986, a revised basic set in 1991, the Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game, using the SAGA system, published by TSR in 1998 and the Marvel Heroic Roleplaying Basic Game, published in 2012 by Margaret Weis Productions. The original game has notable fan popularity as FASERIP, derived from the character characteristics.

The set includes a 16 page introductory “Battle Book” with a cardstock cover, a 48 page “Campaign Book” also with a cover which covers the rest of the rules, a 16 page introductory adventure “The Day of the Octopus”, a two-sided map, twenty five cardboard playing pieces all with dice included. The Campaign Book contains a single page table of contents and index. The contents are all a little on the flimsy side to be honest but are acceptable. The artwork throughout is of an excellent technical standard, occasionally whimsical, and is tightly bound with the context. The writing is presented in two-column justified with a sans-serif font, with horrid shaded text for allegedly highlighting elaborations (black text on a grey background). The writing style is very informal to the point of being downright chatty and sacrifices density for clarity.

Character Generation

Marvel SH is a percentile-based game, with the primary abilities of Fighting, Agility, Strength, Endurance, Reason, Intuition, and Psyche. These are also given a rank description from Feeble (2) to Unearthly (100) and beyond. A typical person has a value of 6. The Campaign Book illustrates these rankings with characters from the Marvel universe (you may as well make use of the trademark). Indeed, it is not until one of the final chapters of the Campaign Book does one receive the details on how to generate your own superhero. That process begins with randomly determining the characters origin (mutant, altered human, high tech wonder, robot, or alien), and then randomly determining values for each ability with an average roll generating a 'Excellent' result, with modifications according to origin.

Variable abilities are calculated from primary abilities. A character's Health score is calculated from the sum of their Fighting, Agility, Strength, and Endurance, and their Karma is based on their Reason, Intuition, and Psyche. Karma is a resource to control luck and fate and is used to modify die rolls. In addition to these there is Resources and Popularity, both of which are what they say on the tin. For new characters, Resources are determined randomly like primary abilities, and Popularity starts at 50, but may be modified according to origins how the player wants to present their character (e.g., publically known adds +20).

Superheroes of course require powers. In Marvel SH, the quantity and general category is determined randomly, with the player selecting a particular power within a category with the rank in that power randomly determined. In addition
to powers characters also have talents, which are mundane but unranked skills. The quantity of talents is also randomly
determined. Powers and talents themselves are described in a mere five pages, but are tightly integrated to the game
system as a whole. A brief advice note is given to provide the option of new or enhanced powers balanced by
limitations. Magic, whilst fully described in the Campaign Book, is considered so powerful that it is usually not
available for starting characters, who must spend a year to pick up the magic use talent.

Character advancement is achieved by opening an Improvement Fund by spending 200 Karma points and then placing
additional Karma in the fund to purchase new powers and talents, improve abilities, and so forth. It's a fairly expensive
process – to just set up the pool would require a hero preventing three global conspiracies and arresting those involved!
A variety of Karma awards are noted in the Campaign Book, which includes a variety of positive gains (from both
crimefighting and charity and educational events), some negatives (big oops, killed an innocent), and even a hat-tip to
roleplaying effort. The values can be more than a little wonky; stopping a global conspiracy is a mere +40, but making
a charity appearance is +30. Still, hopefully in the process of stopping a global conspiracy one can pick up some Karma
along the way.

Equipment and System

Equipment is typically purchased with resource points which, unsurprisingly, come from the variable ability of the
same name. Like characters, some equipment have own abilities which are referenced to a real-world measurement. For
example, vehicles have control, speed, and body abilities with a mini-car having good control, and typical speed and
body, whereas a small jet aircraft will have typical control, remarkable speed, and poor body.

The game system for FEATS (“Function of Exceptional Ability or Talent”) is based around a “Universal Table”, which
cross-references a percentile die-roll with the character's ability to give an outcome, with high-rolls representing a
greater likelihood of success. The table is colour-coded to reflect degrees of difficulty according to white (automatic
success), green, yellow, and red FEATs. Usually characters can act without difficulty against challenges that have
abilities with a green FEAT roll, require a yellow for challenges equal to their ability, and a red for those ranked higher.
The numerical values are relatively unimportant compared to adjectival column descriptives; Captain America, in
effect, has only a 25% better Strength chance than the most feeble of characters, Aunty May.

The combat system is based on rounds between groups, ranging from 5 to 15 seconds. A simple group initiative system
is used (optionally with Intuition bonuses) to determine order of actions. Actions include Move, melee attack, missile
attack, dodge, grapple, and charge. Attacks are made on the Universal Table with results based on whether a white,
green, yellow, or red result depending on the action. Usually it means a loss of Health Points with damage values based
on the character's Strength, plus a weapon bonus for blunt weapons, or a flat value based for all others.

Setting, Scenario and Other Components

Apart from the use of Marvel characters, situations, and Marvel Universe references throughout the product, there is
additional setting information such as a rather lightweight description of the US legal system (compare Villains and
Vigilantes for a comparison), a short section on statistics for a handful of animals, descriptions of unusual
environments, and quite usefully, the Karma gains for villains. Of special note is the short section of advice for Judges
(GM), which are excellent – be a storyteller, be accurate, be neutral, and be prepared.

The scenario, 'Day of the Octopus' makes good use of the maps and the character cards that come with the game. It
starts off with a bit of a thug bash, a bit like attacking giant rats for low-level D&D characters. But there real
excitement comes afterwards as the nefarious Doctor Octopus reveals his wicked plans. What follows is a pretty linear
plot that involves a lot of clobbering and a couple of contrived, but entertaining, set-piece scenes. The Judge will have
do some work if they want something a little sophisticated.

Conclusion
Marvel Super Heroes owes its popularity due to the simplicity of the system and the market share that could promote it (both Marvel and TSR). There are some impressive innovations for a game of its vintage, such as a universal resolution mechanic, and adjectives for character descriptions. The use of Karma as a pool for both experience and in-game buy-in for die modifications is an issue that results in strong opinions, not to mention the very specific code of conduct it encouraged relevant to some comic books. A strength of the game is, despite using some pretty simple language, has an impressive content to page ratio.

The greatest weaknesses of the game are a lack of detail, the lack of built-in balance or even thematic consistency among PCs resulting from overly random chargen, and poor workmanship – but these what is meant that the system is quite good at its core, but poorly implemented. Notoriously, armour is substantially better than dodge, firearms do relativel small amounts of damage – and so it goes on. Overall, it is an interesting product but certainly one not to be taken too seriously (take it as seriously as the author does!), least some deeply ingrained nerdrage at the implementation flaws and limits.

Style: 1 + .5 (layout) + .6 (art) + .7 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .4 (product) = 3.9
Substance: 1 + .4 (content) + .8 (text) + .6 (fun) + .1 (workmanship) + .6 (system) = 3.5

Champions (fourth edition, 1989)

Introduction and Product

It is difficult to imagine a more canonical superhero game than Champions and it is almost certain that the 4th edition remains the most well-known of that game, not the least for being released in a period where Hero Games had teamed up with Iron Crown Enterprises for production and distribution. Affectionately known as “the big blue book”, this edition came out in both hardback and softback editions. The former has some pretty solid glue and stitch binding although excessive use over some twenty-five years has resulted in pages loosening. The cover artwork of George Perez of Seeker versus Mechanon is evocative and very well-executed. The interior art is above average and contextually based.

The book itself is quite a tome. It is, it must be said from the start, actually two tomes. First is the Hero System rules, a universal point-based game system which weights in at some 215 pages, and second is the Champions supplement, a superhero setting using the Hero system rules, consisting of a sourcebook (58 pages) and a campaign book (70 pages). To make sense of this there is a solid three page table of contents, but surprisingly no index. The text is presented in two-column justified with a sans-serif font, with good use of white space and headers. Page numbers are clear but only have minimal identification. The writing style varies between the formal and informal but is also clear.

Characteristics, Skills etc.

Following a very useful introduction that provides pointers for both new players, those new to the Hero system, and for those who are experienced with the Hero system, the game dives
right into a setting question of different character power levels, defined by their character points. There are eight primary characteristics (STRength, DEXterity, CONstitution, BODY, INTelligence, EGO, PREsence, COMeliness) and six figured characteristics (Physical Defense, Energy Defense, SPeed, RECovery, ENDurance, STUN) derived from the primary characteristics, along with two movement modes (Running, Swimming). Characteristics have variable point costs, depending on their perceived usefulness – Dexterity (which contributes to a number of skill chances and to Speed) costs more than Comeliness (which has little in-game function).

After characteristics is skills. These have a skilled chance of 9+(characteristic/5) or less on 3d6. It’s a workable formula that flattens high-end characteristics, but is strange with low-end values, which are more common in ‘heroic’, rather than ‘superheroic’ games. Resolution can be contested (skill versus skill) and some skills can complement others. This is in addition to various modifiers, including a time-scale chart, and depending on the setting, there is a set of default “Everyman” skills which all characters receive. The skill list, of about 65 core skills not including specialisations, provides a fairly complete set of activities, albeit with a bias towards the contemporary.

Following skills is perquisites (perks) and talents. The former includes contacts, followers, and money. The latter includes various unusual abilities that aren't quite skills, such as time sense, luck, speed reading and so forth. It is here that the game handily provides identifiers for powers that need to be checked for individual campaigns.

**Powers**

Whilst characters in many realistic-heroic campaigns can do without powers, any fantasy or superhero setting will need them – and there’s quite a collection. A particular feature of powers in the Hero System is that they describe an effect in game terms, with the world-based logic for the effect being a supplementary question – the “special effect”. Thus an energy blast is a power, and the actual form it takes (lightning bolt, flame bolt, stream of savage butterflies etc) is the “special effect”. There are some sixty-five powers in total, again with those which may be unbalancing to certain campaigns identified. Each power has anywhere from a few paragraphs to half a page in description, with plenty of examples.

Powers are categorised as adjustment powers (those that modify characteristics or other powers), mental powers (based on the character's Ego characteristic), movement powers (from flight to tunneling), size powers (growth, shrinking), special powers (endurance free, exclusive of power frameworks, always on), and a catch-all list of standard powers. There is a consistent Endurance cost for most powers (1 END per 10 character points) when used, and a descriptive for the time scale of application (Instant, Consistent, Persistant).

A characteristic of the Hero System is that the base description of powers can be modified with a variety of advantages and limitations. The cost of a power is then modified by multiplying the relative benefit of the advantages, and divided with the relative cost of the limitation. Furthermore, for a radically reduced cost in powers, groups of associated powers can be put in a framework whether as an elemental control, which allows for several powers to be used simultaneously, or a multipower, where each power occupies a resource slot. Even more adaptable (and often limited) is the variable power pool to represent such collections as a gadgeteers workshop.

**Character Disadvantages, Package Deals, Sample Characters**

The Hero System innovated the concept of character disadvantages, a variety of psychological, physical, and social flaws which, when valued, provide the hero not only with a richer in-game personality but also bonus character points in compensation. The amount of points available is limited to character type, and can be bought off or changed in the course of a campaign. Whilst each disadvantage is given a detailed point value, a very sensible overarching rule applies; a disadvantage that isn't a disadvantage isn't worth any points. To further round out a character there are package deals, a point bonus for purchasing an associated set of skills etc. Finally, as part of the character generation process a small set of sample characters are provided from a variety of genres, along with some simple “normal”
Combat and Adventuring

The Hero System combat system starts with perception with modifiers making the distinction between targetting and non-targetting senses. When combat is entered into it is typically carried out in a hex grid system (with the scale of one inch = 2 metres). Combat is run in turns of 12 seconds, or segments. Actions occur according to the character's Speed characteristic, ranging from 1 action per turn to 12, with each opportunity for actions being a phase. There's plenty of actions that can be carried out in an action phase; different attack modes, turning on powers, different types of charge, and so forth. A defensive combat maneuver can be carried out early to abort a future phase, or an action can be held for a phase. As a component of comic book reality, a soliloquy takes no time.

A successful hit in combat is based on 11+OCV (offensive combat value) – DCV (defensive combat value) on 3d6, with END costs for the attack. The same applies for EGO based-attacks. If appropriate for a superheroic genre, check for Knockback, or for a heroic game, Knockdown. There is a variety of modifiers to this base chance depending on circumstances, the attack type, and the combat maneuver in question. Damage is based on the class of the attack, with each 5 points of an attack doing 1d6 of normal damage, with graduations in between. This d6 represents the amount of STUN damage caused, with a 1 on the die causing no BODY damage, and a 6 causing 2 points. Normal damage, both STUN and BODY is resisted by PD or ED as appropriate to the attack. However if the attack is a Killing Attack (e.g., slashing and piercing weapons) then PD and ED do not provide protection against unless there is resistant defense (e.g., armour). Killing attacks have a cost of 1d6 per 15 points and have a standard STUN multiplier of 1d6-1, or, optionally, a hit location chart can be used. When a character's STUN is brought down to 0, they are unconscious, and if their BODY is brought to zero they are dying. There are optional rules for hit location and follow-up effects such as sectional defenses, and impairing and disabling wounds. A character's REC value typically determines how much END and STUN they can recover each turn, but also a healing rate for BODY. Finally there is also PREsence attacks, which can be used to hesitate, awe, or cow opponents.

The Environment and Character Progression

Characteristic rolls are used for those actions which aren't really skill-based and are derived from 9+CHAR/5, typical for the game. Whilst there is plenty for STR-based characteristic effects, there's little in the way of others. One is never quite sure where INT 18 in the Hero System is placed in real-world comparisons, as their is insufficient examples of what such a value represents or what sort of difficulty rolls are required for such a rating.

There are workable rules for drowning and falling (which all RPGs need), and true the superhero setting, objects have their own DEF (armour) and BODY as they tend to get smashed up and thrown around. Other favourites for the game include rules for automatons (whether robots or zombies) and specific powers that such entities have, along with the limited characteristic range for computers (AI systems get an EGO!). Vehicles and bases are built in a similar fashion, like a character, but with their own particular characteristics range, and Size for bases. For superheroic games vehicles and bases cost points (albeit at 1/5 value) and in heroic games they're paid with cash. Further to environment considerations are vehicular combat, an extraordinarily bare list (3) of animals, and then several pages of weapons and armour.

Experience in the Hero System is doled out per adventure, with a couple of character points for an short session and bonuses for longer adventures, inventiveness, roleplaying etc. It is possible for the GM to assign experience points for specific skills or attributes used in an adventure. Apart from the designer's notes and some brief remarks in adding new powers etc, a long combat example brings on to the end of the Hero System rulebook.

Champions Sourcebook and Campaign Book

The Champions Sourcebook is a players and GMs guide for participating in superhero campaign. For characters a
standard but well-written introduction of the character creation process of three parts; concept, ability purchase, and balancing points. One interesting thing about the Hero system is that you don't have to start anywhere in particular with character creation; start with powers, start with disadvantages, start with abilities – whatever the player wants to fit the concept. Origin stories are always part of the genre, and this is obviously included along with building character stories and their motivation. Some amusing powergamer rule exploits round off the chapter; my favourite (given my Georgist inclinations) is the Landlord who, for a modest number of points, can build a base that covers all known land. As the saying goes, “If I own all the land and you own all the money, by the following morning I will own all the land and money, and you shall be my slave”.

The GM's section is a policy of elaborating on structured flexibility. That is, it goes through the universal aspects of being a GM and in particular the campaign setting ground rules for diverse superhero campaigns. It encourages player input, establishes the importance of the PCs, scales the aspects of “campaign tone”, and so forth, before moving into the system-specific aspects such as character building guidelines, optional rule choices, and recommended or disallowed skills, powers etc.

Another chapter covers designing adventures, which again is a collection of very sensible advice of bringing the PCs together, bringing loose ends together, checking for hunteds and DNPCs, bringing in complications, incorporating the game system mechanics, organising subplots, and supervillain motivations and activities which are – alas – somewhat too stereotypical. Handy combat summary and adventure recap sheets add to the collection. Following this however, the sourcebook goes a bit random – putting several short sections in place with little consideration for order. This includes a checklist for PCs, maintaining the campaign, environmental aspects (surely this should be in the main rulebook?), very brief notes on legal aspects, and to conclude some random charts. It was a fairly disappointing conclusion to what was otherwise a good section.

The Champions campaign book covers the specifics of a specific superhero campaign. It starts with a superhero group, including the unfortunate Seeker, and their base and vehicle, followed by a range of other characters that can be used as heroes or villains. At one page per character these are fully-fleshed out individuals and certainly are well presented. A multi-chapter introductory scenario which is pretty linear, but does include some interesting opportunities for unexpected conflicts and in a good variety of settings. There are options for the scenario to make it more comic or grittier, and the main quarry of the scenario, who stay hidden for some time, are also described as per the other characters in the sourcebook.

Conclusion

Champions remains perhaps the most well known superhero game for a good reason. The scope and scale is usually well-suited and there is a serious attempt to cover a great deal of ground. There are some very unexpected and disappointing exclusions, especially on the heroic level – there is insufficient attention to technological development, skill levels and modifications, and the bestiary is utterly woeful. Whilst it can be run as a heroic-level game, further work is required. The game system may be a little on the crunchy side for contemporary tastes, but it sensibly introduces this for the purposes of adaptability. Stylistically, there is a lot of positive remarks to be said about the book. Physically superb and well-written the book also has decent artwork, textual expression and organisation and so forth.

Overall, this quite the classic game for the genre and its recognition as such is well-deserved.

Style: 1 + .7 (layout) + .7 (art) + .7 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .9 (product) = 4.7
Substance: 1 + .7 (content) + .5 (text) + .7 (fun) + .7 (workmanship) + .7 (system) = 4.3

DC Heroes (third edition, 1993)

DC Heroes was published by Mayfair games, initially as a boxed set in 1985, with a second edition in 1989 and a third
Despite discomfort with the range of possible success which is exacerbated with the doubling system, the core system of the doubling scale, the attributes, and the action and result tables are quite solid. For those who want a more gritty and realistic approach to the system, the 2d10 roll could be easily replaced with 3d6 with no doubles for action resolution. Hero Points may also be used to modify value ratings.

Character design is based on 450 Hero Points, with variable Factor Costs which measures the relative usefulness of the Power, Attribute, Skill or Wealth. Again a table determines the actual costs; in this instance a formula could have been developed instead as it is clear there are a few break-points in the table which some players will exploit. The extensive range of superheroic Powers come with a Base Cost as well as a Factor Cost which can be further reduced in cost by linking the power or skill with an Attribute. Bonuses and Limitations can be applied to Powers which further change the Factor Cost. Overall it's a comprehensive system, tends somewhat towards number-crunching with Powers relatively inexpensive compared to Attributes. In addition, characters may also purchase advantages, drawbacks, wealth, and provide their personality and background, all of which modify their Hero Point total. Characters must also have a motivation which neither provides nor costs Hero Points. Additional Hero Points are gained as adventure experience usually ranging from 1 to 6. The cost for increasing Attributes is quite different to purchasing them in the first place, using a different table with significantly less differentiation.
The skills and powers are descriptive and comprehensive with all the expected abilities. The 32pp of powers are differentiated in physical, mental, mystical and a handful of special powers and, as mentioned, are relatively inexpensive compared to Attributes with usual Factor Cost of 1-4, with some notable exceptions such as Flame Being (FC 6, Invulnerability FC 7, Air Control FC 9 and Continuum Control FC 10). On occasion there is even moments of humour in an otherwise dry text (the Power "Dumb Luck"). The skill list is a mere 8 pages, and does allow for unskilled use in some circumstances as well as specialisation. Some abilities which are would normally considered skills (e.g., Area Knowledge) are considered advantages.

Combat in DC Heroes is carried out in phases of 4 seconds (0 APs) with initiative determined on a d10 plus their character's Initiative Value (the sum of their Action Attributes). Actions are announced lowest to highest, but resolved highest to lowest. Conflicts are resolved, as per any other between Action Values and Opposing Values, Effect Values and Resistance Values modified, of course, by various powers and skills as appropriate. Characters are unconscious when their Body is reduced to zero and dead at negative Body. Most combat however, is defined as "Bashing" rather than "Killing" and the objective is to reduce the opponent to an unconscious state rather than a negative or dead state. As with other actions, Hero Points may be spent to improve initiative, attacks, defense and even to reduce damage. True to the genre, there is also knockback effects along with various maneuvers such as flailing attacks, grapples, sweeps, charges, trick shots etc.

A short chapter on character interaction covers task resolution methods for interrogation, persuasion and intimidation is followed by gadget design, construction and modification and repair along with notes for the genre-convention of omni-gadgets. The same chapter also includes standard equipment such as buildings, landscape items, electronics and computers, vehicles and weapons. This is appropriately followed by a chapter on wealth and upkeep (charity is good for heroes!) and finally two excellent chapters on gamemastering and plot and sub-plot development.

The final section of the book are the appendices. This includes an a solid 20-page introduction to the DC Universe with minimal notes by Jack Kirby, Roy Thomas, Rober Kanigher, Mike Gold, Roger Stern, Neil Gaiman, Dan Jurgens, and Paul Kupperberg. It is really pushing it however to describe these comments, all less than 1/2 a page, as "essays" as the back-cover blurb does. This is appropriately followed by 14 pages of DC Heroes characters, including several versions of Superman, Batman and his friends, Green Arrow, Green Lantern, Aquaman, the Flash and so forth, several pages of natural and exotic animals and to wrap up, a few pages of genre information and charts and tables.

Whilst the superhero genre has never been my kettle of fish (doesn't explain why I have at six different games in that genre), and my actual play experience of DC Heroes has been minimal, the game system has always held some appeal over the past fifteen years, albeit a little crunchy and with some mechanics criticisms as noted. It is a detailed and solid system and could quite possibly be used successfully in high-end fantasy campaigns which emphasise magical powers. As a major comic publisher it is somewhat inevitable that DC Heroes would retain a large degree of support among gamers well after publication ceased, but the significant production of some 60-plus supplements and sourcebooks certainly helped. Apparently, the game system today lives on with Pulsar Games' "Blood of Heroes" RPG, although this does not include the DC-branded characters. Overall this is a solid publication with some excellent ideas and support for the DC superhero universe.

Style: 3/5, Substance 4/5

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Godsend Agenda (first edition, 2001)

Introduction and Physical Product

This review is going a little out on a limb; instead of reviewing the most well-known iteration of this game, the second edition which utilised the D6 system, it is taking a look at the raw but worthy first edition. The well-glued 224 page softback with a simple but effective golden scarab as the cover motif. The greyscale and line-drawings for internal art are usually of a fair to good standard. Of particular note is the massive comic which introduces the game, taking up
some 40 pages, with others scattered throughout the text; notably the author seems fond of the naked female form. After that one can finally glance at the table of contents, which is a very annoying place to put it. Furthermore there is no index. Combined finding things in actual play can sometimes be a little challenging.

This said, page numbers are clearly marked and the two-column serif font is easy to read. The greyscale text for highlighting incidentals is also clear. The language is quite informal, but fairly clear, although sometimes key examples of play are incorporated in comic-book style pages which are not exactly the easiest to find. The organisation of the text could do with a little bit of work. There is metaplot and setting information scattered at the start of the book and at the end, and mixed with the introduction which provides the basic mechanics. The chapters as titled are, after a hefty introduction, 'Character Creation', 'Powers', 'Combat and Recovery', 'Gamemaster', 'The World of Godsend Agenda'. There is also some appendices which includes sample characters, animals and NPCs, charts, a timeline, and some plot hooks.

**Character Generation and Core Mechanic**

Character generation is point-based system which allows variation according to the GM's setting. It begins with a concept and archetype, the latter providing a personality template and a bonus for certain actions the lead to the recovery of Ka, a metagame currency to modify die rolls. It's a fairly limited set but workable, and the Ka rewards in actual play don't seem as important as the natural recovery rate. In addition it's a attribute and skill system. Average human attributes range is between 1-5, and the superheroes of Godsend Agenda typically push that upper limit and might have a couple of extraordinary values. The attributes are Strength, Dexterity, Intelligence, Spirit, and Influence.

There is also important figured values from this include Base Damage (half Strength), Mind and Body Points, representing mental and physical stamina, respectively. If either of these are reduced to zero the character is unconscious, and if they are reduced to a negative value, the character is dead. It should be evident from this that PCs are not typically too much powerful in terms of the ability to take damage than normal characters. Base Initiative in tactical time is also a figured characteristic; player characters receive 3 Action Points per round whereas NPCs receive 2. Finally, maximum Ka is also a figured value. Notably characters may also combine and form a Ka Pool (instant joke there).

There are roughly thirty base skills are rated in ranks with an associated attribute. The broader skills include the various ranged weapons (seriously, one per coarse type should be enough) and various knowledge skills. The list is a quite biased towards contemporary settings, which is not what all the scenarios provide. Each skill receives a paragraph or two in description. Task resolution is based on skill plus attribute plus 2d6 versus a target number – the average being 13, and recommended variations, without many examples it should be noted, from -4 (9) to +30 (43). Double one's represents a critical failure, and double-sixes are open-ended without limit.

In addition to attributes and attribute-linked skills, characters also have advantages and flaws, the latter providing additional character points. All this may begin to sound familiar with several other RPGs. These are what would expect from other games and our typically purchased on a per-level basis. The game does include some inventive names for common examples worthy of note; this includes Dervish Defense (bonus dodges), Ball and Chain (effectively DNPC).

Powers are likewise purchased on a per level basis and are based on concrete rather than abstract descriptions, and also have an associated attribute. There is close to one hundred powers all up, giving quite a good range of potential implementations. Powers have “add ons” which refer to special modifications from the base description, both positive and negative, which varies the point cost. Given the typically fairly gritty level of PCs in terms of their usual attributes, the powers is where the superheroes have the opportunity to show their outstanding characteristics. There is all sorts of weightings involved in range, damage, and cost, as each power is quite specific, leading to the possibility of weighting errors. A possible example is Energy Blast, which at a cost of 3 points per level, does 1d6 damage per level with a 20 foot range per level, whereas Water Projection does the same damage, has half the range, provides a weak movement power of 5 feet per level, and costs 6 points per level. Also included under 'Powers' is gadgets and inventions, which is
built in a similar manner to a character but with a reduced cost according to the type (e.g., 25% cost for vehicles, 50% hand-held device etc).

**Combat and Recovery**

Combat is carried out in five second rounds, with a simple 2d6+Initiative determining the rank for the combat. Characters receive a number of Action Points per round as mentioned; the actions include Move (Dexterity times 5 in feet per AP), Attack, Dodge or Parry, Aim, Ready, Reload, Stand from Prone. An attack is a simple 2d6+skill versus a flat target number of 10, or against the result of a Dodge or Parry. There are increased difficulties for ranged weapon distances (i.e., double base distance is +4, triple is +8). There is also rules for burst fire from automatic weapons, charge attacks, feints, disarm, grapples, etc, along with a range of skill modifiers based on context. Armour protects against damage according to its Defense Rating, often with a negative Dexterity adjustment. Armour is also ablative, which adds a bit of extra bookkeeping in combat. Characters are Stunned if they lose 50% of their Mind or Body points in a single attack, which reduces their AP by one, and forces them into a defensive mode.

Damage will depend on the power used or the weapon used. With melee weapons they are presented as a bonus on top the unrolled Base Damage (e.g., a sword is 1d6+3+Base) or half that Base with muscle-powered range weapons (e.g., bows). Other ranged weapons have a simple damage roll (e.g., a .45 pistol does 2d6 damage). Note that without armour, an alleged superhero could find themselves in serious trouble when threatened by several normal characters. Especially beware ranged weapons in this context! A variety of environmental damage sources are also described; poison, falling, fire, suffocation etc. Recovery is based on 1 point per day in Mind and Body damage, but then with a possible test with an opposed test of the maximum Mind or Body value versus the current damage with a bonus point for each five points of success.

**Game Master and Setting**

The Game Master's chapter provides advice for running play which is good sense but well structured (have a story, give everyone something to do, pace, provide dramatic tension, pace the game etc). A variety of short campaign ideas and recommended character points are provided which fit into the provided setting, which, in summary form, involves an alien species (the Elohim) and their empire, the ultimate force of the universe (Ka), conflict within the empire, conflict with another alien species (the Chimereans), their arrival on earth and the continuation of that conflict within their use of Ka power and earthly demigods. It's not really the sort of setting that particularly grabbed me, but it's certainly within expectations of a superhero genre publication. There is a good amount of supporting material for the setting, including a very hefty backstory history, numerous NPCs and organisations, and plot hooks. It is quite possible to completely ignore the entire setting and simply use the rules as presented, or simply to derive some ideas from the setting and adapt to one's preferences. The rules are systemically independent of the setting, and other appendicies such as the NPC and animal chart (for example) can be used regardless of adoption. The Gamemaster chapter also includes experience point rewards which are based on per adventure are provided for roleplaying, character development, and dramatic development.

**Conclusion and Evaluation**

Overall Godsend Agenda is well-produced, both as a physical product and as a game. The overall system may not be particularly creative, but it is well chosen selection of influences. It is a little on the raw side, both in terms of the presentation, workmanship, and content. It is recommended, especially if the GM and players are prepared to catch imbalances as play develops and to elaborate the incomplete elements. Nevertheless, as writ it could have really dealt with a new edition, which of course it received.

Style: 1 + .3 (layout) + .6 (art) + .6 (coolness) + .5 (readability) + .7 (product) = 3.7
Substance: 1 + .4 (content) + .5 (text) + .6 (fun) + .4 (workmanship) + .8 (system) = 3.7

Overview and Physical Product

Mutants and Masterminds is a d20-based superhero RPG. That simple sentence covers both the ingenuity of the game, making good use of the OGL to expand the scope of the license designed for Dungeons and Dragons to include a different sort of superheroic character to the 20th level wizard. As a result it has an easy lead in for players who, in all probability, are already familiar with the system but also the opportunity to elaborate from a well-established base.

The physical product is a rock-solid thing of beauty. A hardback of some 256 gloss colour pages, and reasonably well-bound. The colourful artwork is of a high and consistent standard throughout and is typically contextual. The layout, in two-column justified serif font, marks each page with chapter title and page and makes use of colour as a further identifier. There is different emphasized sections, some for tables, special elaborations, and “under the hood” (both the traditional metaphor and perhaps an hat-tip to Watchmen). There is a detailed one-page table of contents and a three-page index. Following an extensive introduction and glossary with very satisfactory content, there are eleven chapters: Hero Creation, Abilities, Skills, Feats, Powers, Characteristics, Devices and Equipment, Combat, Gamemastering, World Building, Friends and Foes, and an Appendix of three introductory adventures. The writing style throughout is formal, precise, and of a higher density to most publications.

Mechanics and Characters

The core mechanic is the same as other d20-based systems; roll a d20, add various modifiers as appropriate, and compare the result to the target number, or Difficulty Class. However there are a number differences between Mutants and Masterminds and other d20-based systems. There are no character classes, the closest equivalent being packages of traits which are more of a convenience or archetypes, which are an excellent range pre-generated example characters which means you can start with a character pretty much right away. The entire game is run entire with the d20 with no other die involved, there are no hit points (using grades of damage instead), and there is a metagame resource of Hero Points. These are used to improve a roll, dodge, invoke a feat, escape death etc, and are acquired thorough narrative elements; setbacks, complications, heroism, and roleplaying.

Mutants and Masterminds is a point-based system with “power points” determining the cost of all numerical aspects of character creation. Abilities, attack bonuses, defense bonuses, save bonuses, skills, feats, powers, and drawbacks all cost power points to purchase (negative in the case of drawbacks) in a linear fashion. Gamemasters set the level for the campaign (the default examples use level 10, which sets the power points to 150), and this provides a cap to attack, defense, saving throw modifiers, toughness, ability scores, skill ranks etc. Ability scores are the classic six-pack: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, Charisma, with an average of 10-11 and a bonus or penalty of +1 for every two points above or below that figure (the scale is dropped in third edition as superfluous). As a notable difference from standard d20, Strength and Dexterity do not provide bonuses to attack or defend, and Intelligence does not provide bonus skill points. There are various modifiers for a character's Size, with a scale from Miniscule (3 inches and less) to Awesome (128 ft or more). Strength capacity has non-linear increases to account for truly super-strength (e.g., to push the moon requires Strength of 350). As a great little rules hack, movement is noted as miles per hour in walking speed, with tactical feet per round being an order of magnitude of that number (e.g., 5 mph equal 50 feet per round).

Skills are pretty much as expected, although with some modern technological examples (e.g., Computers). In all there is roughly 30 skills with broad-based Craft, Knowledge, and Profession skills and with ties to ability scores. Each skill is defined and provided with example Difficulty Classes to illustrate use. Feats are all-or-nothing abilities that provide bonuses to combat, to skill use, to the use of hero points, and with a large general category, which does include a range of non-combat advantages. There is approximately 80 Feats in total, most of which can be described sufficiently in a simple paragraph. An interesting contribution is the ability to buy some classic Feats in multiple levels (e.g., Improved
Powers of course are a focus of any superhero RPG, and Mutans and Masterminds is no exception. Powers are also bought in ranks with variation according to the relative usefulness of the power mainly in terms of its combative power. Powers also have extras and flaws, which modify the base cost per level. A categorisation is described according to their effects, specifically Alteration (shape changing), Attack, Defense, General (catch-all), Mental, Movement, Sensory, and Trait. Powers, like everything else, are based on a d20 plus power rank and modifiers versus a Difficulty Class. It is possible for Power vs Skill checks etc to occur, and there’s various modifications to time, range, and value (e.g., people effected) according to rank. In a sense, Powers in Mutants and Masterminds are like an flexible version of spells in Dungeons and Dragons, and it is not surprising to discover that over hundred are described, usually with three or more paragraphs.

The combat system is very similar to standard d20, but with some notable streamlining. Initiative is rolled once per conflict, and superfast heroes don't receive multiple actions per round, although they usually be able to carry out the range of actions provided sooner. An attack is based o the same core mechanic, with a wide range of modifiers offered. Damage is not rolled, but rather a successful attack requires a Toughness saving throw, with various DCs based on the force of the attack. Damage is based on how badly the roll is failed by. As is often the case, the combat section also describes the various damaging effects of the environment on characters, and the end of the chapter provides a very handy condition summary.

Setting and Scenarios

A solid chapter of Mutants and Masterminds is dedicated to equipment; with a distinction drawn between devices and equipment. The former provides access to a power and cost power points, the latter is mundane items. A further distinction is draw on whether the item is independent or not. A bionic implant, at least in superhero terms, is neither a device, nor equipment, but an implementation of a power. Rules are provided for invention and jury rigging, and with the prospect of mishaps. Wealth is also defined as a base benefit and check system, rather than counting gold pieces. There is a short list of general equipment, a longer list of melee weapons, ranged weapons, armour, and various vehicles. There is extensive components to buying headquarters and the building of constructs.

A gamemastering chapter provides an elaboration of the DC model and some general advice about running the game, creating adventures, and tweaking the rules. A following world building chapter provides an campaigns in terms of setting, style, a very lengthy elaboration on matters of genre (a reference to the comic era and their style and theme), various cosmological approaches, history, brief notes on rather vague catch-all 'society', and finally organisations. A final chapter provides an extensive range of potential NPC's, both friend and foe (as the chapter is entitled) as well as more brief statistical overviews of “supporting cast”. The book concludes with two scenarios, one fairly simple, and the second which is deliberately designed for greater campaign integration and complexity.

Evaluation

This is truly an excellent game; it is extremeley well produced, visually appealing, with plenty of detail, a wide scope, and innovative take on the d20 system. It is very flexible, quick in actual play, and highly enjoyable. It doesn't quite have the same amount of detail as, say the Hero System, but it certainly has a lot more than plenty of others, and does so in a manner that is even more consistent that n the standard d20 rules.

Style: 1 + .8 (layout) + .7 (art) + .8 (coolness) + .7 (readability) + .8 (product) = 4.6
Substance: 1 + .8 (content) + .7 (text) + .8 (fun) + .9 (workmanship) + .8 (system) = 5.0
Angel De Fantasma  
by Michael Keegan

Walking home to her small apartment from another long night of studying at the library, 23 yr old Amanda Mittlesohn was just about exhausted. That, combined with a horrible night's sleep the night before, she would be lucky to get home in one piece. But, home she got, and the cool A/C felt good. Most of the lights were off save for the porch light and the small hallway night-light.

"Good, Vicki's out at a party somewhere. Hopefully, whoever she decides to screw tonight takes her to HIS house." She mutters to herself, walking into her bedroom and stripping for a nice hot shower.

Starting the water in the tub, she checks her face in the mirror, sets her glasses on the back of the toilet, then, squinting to see the shower controls, sets them to her liking. Climbing in, she loses herself to the pulsating water jets, as they literally pulse the stress out of her sore muscles. After a soothing 20 minutes, and quick check of the calendar she and Vicki share, she realizes that her cycle is coming.

"Great. In 3 days, I get a week of pounding headaches, feeling as fat as an elephant and forced to wear sweats in 90 degree heat. Lovely." She sighs as she wraps the small towel around her head and a towel around her chest. Stopping at the mirror, she moves the towel down to her waist, and checks each of her 34B cup breasts for lumps. Her mother, the family matriarch, beat breast cancer at 54, and now she and her sister, Elizabeth, check themselves religiously.

Gasping as she's not paying complete attention to what she's doing and scratches her left nipple with a fingernail, she sighs and rewraps the towel around her top and moves out to her bed. Switching on the small TV on the dresser, she enters the channel for the local news.

"and tonight's solar flare activity should give amateur astronomers quite a show tomorrow night, right Teresa?"
"That's right Tom, with the right equipment, and enough distance from the city, you should have one heck of a show. Weather and sports after this."
She switches off the set, moves from her bed and looks at the telescope still sitting in it's store packaging.

"The Celestron Nexstar 130 SLT had been a gift from her father before she went down to Texas. "If you ever get bored, just look up. Plenty to see up there." He had said, but between her course load and her two part-time jobs, one at a pawn shop as the accountant, and the other at a Taco Cabana taking orders, she rarely had time to study, let alone go see stars. But, if she didn't take a break soon, she knew she'd go bonkers. Finals were over, but she really needed to push this last week or so, if she wanted a good internship over the summer.

"What the hell, I need a night off. Tomorrow night, I'm gonna go see stars!" She said proudly, dropping her towel and grabbing a bed-shirt. It was pink, with the image of Tweety on the front, the big-headed canary flipping off anyone looking at it. Laying down, she was asleep in seconds.

The next morning started as it always did. Waking to the smells of fresh brewed coffee and the staccato-speech patterns of Billy Banks talking Vicki through his advanced class of do it yourself at home Tae-Bo.

Except, when Amanda slowly staggered toward the kitchen, she didn't find Vicki dancing, whirlng and jumping about. She found her grunting, writhing and moaning under a blanket, being serviced by 'insert random college jock's name here'.

"VICKI! Dammit, you have a room too ya know!" Amanda yelled at her, which brought an abrupt end to the activities under the blanket and the blonde girl's head poking out of one end.
"God, you are such a prude. Go get laid how about it! I got three days before I'm a bloated wreck, so I'm trying to enjoy myself beforehand!" She replied as the hunk with her, leaned up, kissed her nose then gathered his stuff and fled. She threw up her arms in disgust.

Vicki, on the A&M cheerleader squad, made up for her lack of curves by being extremely flexible, both in her body and attitudes. Every night was a different guy, literally, and once she even brought home two, though she kept both for herself as Amanda was already asleep.
"Hey, I'm saving myself for the right guy. I'd rather not have a ton of rug rash to show that special someone."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Being a virgin is hardly a selling point in this day and age, unless you marry an Amish. Most guys want a girl who knows what the hell to do 'tween the sheets, ya know?" She replied quirking an eyebrow at her prudish roommate.

"Knowing what to do versus being an unpaid prostitute? I think I'll stay a virgin, thank you very much." Amanda sighed, pouring herself a cup of coffee. Vicki scuffed and marched naked to her room, slamming the door. Adding sugar and milk to taste, she checked the fridge to see where she was going today.

Professor Matthews at 9, to discuss an internship with NASA as a Physicist.
Class at 10:30, Modern History (Bleh)
Lunch at 12
Class at 1:30, Quantum Theory (Her favorite)
Taco Cabana by 3 until 6:30.
Study group at 7. But tonight, she was going to go see stars. 'Billy Roberts will have to stare at someone else's tits tonight.' She thought to herself.

As her day drug on, all Amanda could think about was her star-gazing trip. She gassed up her jeep at lunch, which she was sure would get a phone call from home, considering it cost just over $80 to fill it.

"Well, if Daddy complains, I'll just tell him that the 99 Grand Cherokee was HIS idea." She said to herself as she wheeled into the Taco Cabana parking lot.

3 and a half hours later she was pulling up in front of her duplex. Vicki's Mustang was missing, so she was out and about. Running in and grabbing her scope, she stowed it and headed west on hwy 44 out toward Alice.

Just west of San Diego, she found a pad site that looked to be a failed gas well with a broken gate. Swinging it open, she drove out to the middle of the site, and began setting up her telescope. It would be dark soon, and tightening bolts in the dark didn't appeal to her. Laying out her sleeping bag and setting up her folding chair, she sat and waited for the sun to finish setting.

2 Hours later...

The clouds that normally obscure the sky in and around Corpus didn't exist out here, and the view of the sky was spectacular. She could see most of the constellations and even had a good view of Jupiter. As she watched it however, a speck of white streaked across in front of Jupiter. She looked around to see if she was alone, and indeed she was. She didn't see any searchlights in use near Corpus, so it wasn't that. Looking back through the scope, she couldn't find the streak. She moved the frame back and forth looking for it, and until she swung it back toward where she was looking last, she found it.

It was a lot bigger though. Looking up but not through the scope, she saw the object high in the sky. It seemed to hover above where she was, off set to the east, as though it were searching San Diego. Then it moved toward her location. It was easily 2 to 3 miles up, but whatever it was, it was BIG! She couldn't make out its exact shape, but it was more oblong, like those annoyingly huge pills she was given once for a cold. Backing away from her scope, she moved slowly toward her Jeep. It stopped almost directly over her and as she looked up, a cone of white light settled around her...

She awoke to find a colony of fire ants moving beside her face. She jumped up, brushing the nasty little things off of her. Her telescope was right where she left it, as was her Jeep, but it was almost dawn.

"Shit! What the hell?" She swore, checking herself. She was still dressed, same as she had been the night before. The only thing amiss were the two energy bars and the bottle of water she had brought with her. They were gone and the water bottle was empty. Her stomach grumbled almost a second later.

Gathering up her telescope, she tossed it into the back of the jeep, climbed in and headed back to town.

Just east of Alice however, she had to pull over. Stopping on the shoulder, she flung open her door, leaned out, and vomited. It was bluish-green with white chunks in it. Eyes wide, she launched off of the shoulder, nearly getting hit by a sand truck in the process and raced for home. She arrived 30 minutes later and finding Vicki to still be out, parked and ran inside, making a beeline for the bathroom, where she again vomited up more of the bluish-green stuff with white chunks. It left a weird taste in her mouth, like a cross between pine needles, blueberries and tofu. Since she wasn't a health food eater, none of that made any sense to her.

Staggering to her room, she stripped out of her clothes, fell atop her bed, and passed out...

The soft chirping of her cell phone woke her. Opening one eye, she saw her alarm clock, which said it was 8:45, but it was dark outside. Only when she grabbed her cell did she realize it was 8:45 at night! The text messages she had were all from her night job at 24 RPG REVIEW ISSUE 30 March 2016
Taco Cabana, asking if she was coming in. Her manager was a nice Latino lady who knew her time of the month was coming, and in the third message wished her well and told her she set her a light schedule for the coming week. Clearing the messages, Amanda moved into the kitchen and began rummaging through the cabinets looking for food.

She was starving!

Not finding anything that wouldn't take 30 or more minutes to cook, and seeing nothing but milk, beer, a half drunk bottle of vodka and something that used to be pizza in the crisper, she grabbed the menu from Pizza Hut, and ordered two large meat lover's pizzas. She almost ate that thing in the crisper waiting for her food to arrive, and after throwing all her cash at the delivery guy, she had eaten a whole pizza before she realized she'd done it! About two slices into the second pie, she got her wits back.

Looking at the pizza boxes, she dropped the slice in her hand back into the box, disgusted that she was actually eating pizza. She wasn't a health nut, but she did know that all of the big chains were basically the reason most American's were fat. Belching rather loudly, she moved to the bathroom to shower.

That's when she saw the mark.

On her left thigh, she had what looked like a cattle brand, except it didn't hurt. It had a flowery look to it, almost like a rose. Quickly, she checked the rest of her body, looking for other marks but finding none. Eyes wide, she slipped a finger into her vagina, checking to see if she was still a virgin. She hit resistance a few inches in, and let out a sigh of relief.

After her shower, she put the rest of the pizza into the fridge, but throwing out the thing from the crisper, before it ran up a flag and declared its independence. Feeling bloated, she moved back to her bedroom and lay down. She was asleep in seconds...

As she slept, dreams both vivid and frightening whipped through her mind, of strange rooms, being poked and prodded by strange beings with angular features but human like faces, music that was both eerie yet serene and of a smell, a mix of lilacs, bearing grease and burnt wiring.

She awoke with a scream as Vicki shook her. She jumped back with a shriek.

"Jesus fuckin' Christ on the goddamn cross, scare me half to death how about it!" She said, trying not to freak out as Amanda looked all around.

"Who, where?" She looked totally out of it. Vicki arced an eyebrow at her.

"Ok, who rocked your world last night? And damn, I hope you got pics because I so wanna see the stud muffin you gave your cherry to!"

"My cherry?!" She gasped, as she slipped a finger into herself and checked again, but as before, she was still a virgin. She let out a sigh of relief.

"Ha! Still a virgin!" She said, sticking her tongue out at Vicki, who merely shrugged then went to her room.

Rising from her bed, she stumbled and hit the floor hard.

"Ugh!" She gasped, picking herself up. The flowery brand was still on her thigh, and she pulled on her PJ bottoms to hide it from Vicki. Pulling on a t-shirt, she moved out to the kitchen.

Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she drank half of it before she realized she hadn't added any cream or sugar. Shrugging, she finished it and poured another. Vicki came out of her room a minute or so later, looked at her roommate and smiled.

"So, rough night last night? I saw the pizza in the fridge, so..."

"To be honest, I don't remember much. I do remember a bad case of food poisoning however."

"Ouchie. Anyway, off to work for me. See ya!"

"Bye."

Casting a glance into the sink told her Vicki wasn't holding up her end again. But, she knew unless she wanted those annoying little flies in the house, she'd better do the dishes and just take it out of Vicki's hide later.

Starting the hot water, she dropped the drain plug into place, squirted a shot glass worth of Dawn into the sink and let it fill, switching the hot off halfway. Pouring another cup of coffee, she sipped it as she grabbed the dish scrubby sponge and went looking for silverware first. Reaching into the warm water, she found one of the sharper knives first, cutting her finger.

"Ouch!" She yelped, jerking her hand out of the water. She looked as the nasty cut ran ruby red for all of a second, then the cut healed like it had a zipper!

She freaked.
"What the fuck!?" She shouted, looking her finger over and over, but the wound was gone, and her finger looked fine. Reaching back into the soapy water, she again found that knife the hard way, yelping in pain as it sliced the side of her hand open. Pulling her hand out she looked at the deep cut, knowing she was emergency room bound for sure, when that cut sealed and healed as well. She sat down hard on the chair she had been sitting on drinking her coffee, staring at her hand.

"That's not possible!" She gasped, looking at her hand. Rising, she opened up the junk drawer and pulled out the carving knife her mother swore she'd need.

"You can use it to ward off a would be rapist!" She had said. Amanda laughed. Taking several deep breaths, she held the knife in her right hand, edge to her left wrist, and in a quick slice, cut her wrist wide open.

"OW! FUCK!" She screamed as blood shot across the kitchen, but as before, before she could cover the nasty wound with a rag, it healed. She sat back down, staring then laughing.

"God damn, I'm like friggin' Wolverine!" She said to no one. There was no lingering pain, in fact, all the pain stopped after it healed.

"Damn, that dream... Was I really abducted? Did they do this to me? If so, why?" She asked out loud. Her phone chirped, derailing her train of thought. Moving into the bedroom after cleaning up the blood from everywhere it had sprayed, she looked at the number. It was the Professor. Her internship at NASA had been accepted and she'd need to be in Huntsville, AL in 10 days.

"YES!" She yelled, as she danced around her tiny living room. Moving into the bathroom, she showered, then dressed for a casual day on campus. Jeans, a t-shirt over the pink lace bra she thought she'd never wear and her seldom worn tennis shoes. She looked at herself in the mirror, and before she could grab her glasses, she realized she could see just fine without them! When she tried to put them on, they actually hurt to try to look through! Turning, she looked at the small sign hung by the front door, the one asking for strength.

She could read every word!

"Oh my god! I can see!" She danced happily around the apartment now, stopping and looking at herself in the mirror once more. Taking her hair down from that horrible looking bun, she shook out her reddish blonde locks and smiled. The natural curl she had always had was still there, as her hair framed her face in just the right way.

"Wow, I'm beautiful." She said in shock, as though seeing herself for the first time. Quickly, she changed t-shirts to one a size smaller, and looked as it hugged her curves. Readjusting her bra straps lifted her bosom into a more comfortable position as well as really showing off her curves.

"Now I see why Vicki is so jealous. If I walked into her bar tonight, I'd be going home with the cutest guy, for sure." She said to her reflection with a smile. The words left her lips as her brain slammed on the brakes however.

What am I saying? Is this how I'd act if this were really me? She thought, looking again at her new self in the mirror. Her jeans hugged her hips in just the right way, her shapely legs obvious even through the boot cut of them.

"Who am I kidding? This IS really me!" She said with a grin, and, grabbing her phone, keys and wallet, jumped into her jeep and headed for Roxie's.

Vicki had just finished serving a table of rowdy sailors when a redhead she thought looked really familiar walked in and caught the attention of the entire bar. The new arrival walked in slowly, not sure where she should be going, when one of the guys that she thought she was going home with, took Amanda by the arm, and led her to the bar.

When Amanda looked up into the eyes of this stranger, his smile took her breath away and it was all she could do to not start drooling.

He was very handsome, high cheekbones and chiseled chin, very Bavarian in look, with short cropped brown hair and ice blue eyes. His handlebar mustache, which turned down to his chin, was well groomed and she sensed an air of confidence about him, as though he were someone accustomed to making snap decisions. She scooted her little butt across a bar stool, while he took the stool next to her.

"Scotch for me, and for you?" He asked her, but all she could do was stare at his eyes.

"So...soda?" She said meekly.

"Scotch and a Coke, got it." The bar tender said, as he turned to pour the ordered drinks. Vicki was just about to the bar when a sailor
with a little too much alcohol-induced bravado, reached over and grabbed her ass. She squealed and Amanda's would be date was by Vicki's side in a second, the sailor's wrist held in the man's hand, forcing the would be flirt onto the floor then his knees.

"Apologize for what you did! Or your CO will have a new report to read come morning, Seaman Garcia!"
"Ow, ok, ok, I'm sorry!" He said, and the man let go of his wrist. He moved back to the bar but before he got there, Seaman Garcia had a bottle in his hand and threw it at his would be attacker, his buddies clearing out of the way of the bar brawl they saw coming.
"Look out!" Amanda screamed, as everything seemed to slow way down. Her mind, she swore, was playing tricks on her, as time itself seemed to almost stop. She jumped from her bar stool, and tackled her new found date to the floor as the bottle spun slowly past where he had been standing. They landed on the floor, she on his chest, looking down into his very commanding eyes. He blinked a few times, then time itself returned to normal, at least from her perspective.

"Jesus, did you see that?" One bar patron said.
"How did she move so fast?" Another whispered.
Even Vicki was stunned, as she suddenly recognized her roommate.

"Amanda!?” She gasped, as Amanda's date stood, helping her up as well.
"We should go. Shore Patrol likes to arrest everyone." He whispered into her ear. She nodded. Turning to Vicki she smiled.
"Don't wait up roommate, time for me to lose something tonight."

As they walked out into the parking lot, two Hummers, black in color, with SP on the doors, tore into the parking lot, as white suited cops ran into the bar. Taking Amanda by the elbow, he led/drug her to his car, a Challenger. Unlocking it as they approached, he helped her in, then ran to the other side and jumped in, but he didn't start it.

"Aren't we leaving?" She asked.
"Not yet. If we tear outta here, they'll come chase us. Here, lean close." He said, as he pulled her close to him, and planted a lip lock on her that curled her toes...

This was a first for Amanda, as she hadn't been kissed by a boy since 2nd grade. She knew how to kiss, well, sorta, from various love scenes in many different movies and TV shows. As they sat there, exploring each other with their tongues, Shore Patrol officers walked up and down the lines of parked cars. A few flashlight beams shined in through the windshield but then kept moving. He broke off the kiss a few moments later. She blinked.

"Ok, I think it's safe to move now." He said as he started the car. The engine roared to life, startling her.
"Oh. Umm, where are we going?"
"Up to you. Want to go catch a movie?" He asked, as she looked at him again and smiled. His appearance in the car was softer in the dim lights of the car.

"You're my age, aren't you?"
"I'll be 23 next month. You?"
"24 in 9 months. And, actually, I'd like you to take me home, please?“ She asked shyly.

"Ok, where's home?" She gave him her address, and in a few heart-pounding minutes, they were there.
"Damn, you must be a fighter pilot the way you drove us here. I'm surprised we don't have a swarm of police chasing us."
"I'm lucky that way, and yes, I fly F/A-18's off the Reagan." He said as he got out, ran around to her side, and opened the door for her. She smiled and walked to the door. Luckily she had her keys, and was able to get in. She turned around and saw him heading back to his car!

"Wait! Where are you going?"
"Oh? I thought you wanted a ride home. I figured the kiss was too much and I scared you."
"No, actually, I want you to come in, and well, come inside, and I'll explain."

He ran back around to her door, activating the car's alarm as her front door slid closed. He took a seat as she grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge. Popping the tops, she brought him out one but left hers on the counter.

'If I do what I think I'm about to do, I want to remember all of it.' She thought to herself. 
Handing him the beer, she sat next to him on the love seat. He made her feel so tiny. He was easily 6'3" and at least 220. Compared to her, he was big.

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"So, what did you want to ask me?" He said with a smile. She blushed bright red.
"Well, did I surprise you when I tackled you? I mean, I still don't know how I did it myself, I just saw him pull back to throw that bottle and reacted."

"Yeah, I mean, in a blink you were on top of me and we were on the floor. Thank you again for that. Garcia is from the Reagan, and I know his deck boss. He'll get his in..." He was saying but found himself in another kiss. He put his arms around her, pulling her to his chest.

One thing led to another, and before she knew it, she was rocking up and down on his waist, that one thing that always scared her about sex actually feeling really good...

The next morning...

She lay cuddled against his chest on the big blanket usually wrapped around Vicki. A small reddish-brown stain just below the small of her back would tell Vicki not to tease her anymore. He awoke to her drawing small circles on his chest.
"Morning." She said with a smile.
"Hey." He said, pulling her close and kissing her tenderly. She returned his loving kiss, it making her coo softly.
"Why didn't you warn me you were still a virgin? I would have made your first time more memorable then a horny sailor quickie."
"You say that like I'm complaining. I'm not. As a matter of fact, let's go again." She said as she slid on top of him and they made love for most of the morning.

Just before noon, Vicki came home to find that blanket writhing on the floor. She was stunned, to say the least.
"HEY! You do have your own room ya know!" She yelled, finally getting payback. Amanda looked up from the under the blanket and smiled.
"Touche".
Vicki just giggled.

"So, who's the lucky guy?" She asked, as he stuck his head out from under the blanket. She smiled back.
"You know, I never asked you your name." Amanda said with a smile. He nodded.
"This is true, sorry for that. Guess I got caught up in the moment. Mike, Mike Davis. My buddies call me Dagger."

"Hey, I read about you in the Navy Times!" Vicki began. "You shot down three Iranian jets during the Israeli attack on their nuke plant, right?"
"I'm sorry, that's classified. No, I'm kidding. Yes, 3 older F-14's. A models I think. They're fast, but they handle like trucks. Real easy for a hornet to out-fly." He said, as Amanda gave him the head jerk toward her bedroom. He smiled, as they stood and she raced to her room, not even bothering with the blanket...

Around 5pm...

"Ok, this has been one awesome night, morning and day, but I'm starving." He said, as she again lay cuddled against his chest. Vicki knocked gently on her door frame as he slipped past her to use the bathroom.

"Hi Vicki, what's up?"
"Umm, I know you used to be pure and all, but did you look at our calendar lately?"
"Yeah, I get my period tomorrow, allegedly, why?"
"Have you guys been using any protection, you know, rubbers and such?"
Amanda's eyes went wide!
"Oh crap!" She yelled, but before she could go into total freak-out melt down, Vicki handed her two pills and a glass of water.
"Here, now you can't say I never did anything for you."
"What are they?"
"Morning after pills. Birth control for the morning after. In case you forget the night before."
"Do they work?" She asked, taking both and flushing them down with half the glass of water.
"Do I look pregnant to you?" She replied, striking a side profile pose of her rail thin figure.
"Oh, good." She said with a sigh as she laid back down on the bed. The beeper on her nightstand suddenly started going nuts, and Dagger came running in. He grabbed it, read the code, then leaned down and kissed Amanda lovingly.

"Deployment order. Can I see you again when I get back?"
"I'd feel really insulted if you didn't. I consider you my boyfriend now." She said with a smile. "Boyfriend I am. See ya in 60 to 90!" As he hopped into his pants and ran out the door. The roar of his Hemi shook the air as he left their neighborhood amid the sounds of tires squealing and dogs barking...

"So, how the hell did you move so fast last night? I never picked you for an athlete. A Mathlete maybe, but not anything physical."
"I dunno, I just freaked when that sailor picked up that bottle. I didn't want anything to happen to Mike."
"Yeah, well adrenaline can make you do some extraordinary things. Anyway, I have work tonight. You left your Jeep at the bar. It's still there. Ride in with me and you can get it back."
"Ok."

Moving to her Jeep as Vicki walked inside the bar, an idea struck Amanda. She needed to see if there were any clues left behind while she was out star-gazing.

45 minutes later, she arrived at the pad site and began searching. Other then a discarded water bottle, and not even her brand (Ugh, Aquafina) there was nothing. No tracks, no burn marks, nothing. The ground was the same white caliche that made up all the drill sites in Texas. Moving back to her Jeep, she climbed in and sat back thinking.

'Ok, so I get abducted by aliens, they give me awesome healing powers and super fast reflexes. I wonder what else they did to me?'

Stepping back outside, she looks down the access road that leads to another abandoned pad further back onto this ranch. Setting herself as a track runner, she does a short countdown and upon hitting zero, launches herself forward. Breaking into a fast sprint, she looks down the road and her vision blurs for a second, but when it clears, she's at the first turn! She slides to a stop, looking back down the road to where she parked, almost a quarter mile away! Walking back down the road, feeling just a bit overwhlemed, she sees no footprints in the caliche.

"Wait. I couldn't have jumped this far." She says to herself. Looking again at her Jeep, she focuses on it but as she takes a step forward, she runs into it! Looking down, she's leaning against the front fender.

"Whoa!, No way!" She shouts, looking around. Other then the occasional car going by on 44, she is totally alone.

"Ok, let me try this for real." Looking far away, she sees an oil pump slowly going around and around, on the same ranch as she's on, but easily over a mile away. She only sees it because the terrain in this part of Texas is very flat. She focuses on the pump, narrowing her eyes so as to only see it, and concentrates on it, leaning toward it. Her vision clouded for a second and she was leaning against the fence surrounding the pump!

"Holy!" She shrieked, turning and looking at her Jeep, way back there, toward the road. The only sounds out here with her was the engine that droned as it ran the pump.

"Ok, so I'm not jumping, I'm teleporting! And no horrible scent of brimstone afterward either!" She finishes with a grin.

"I wonder, how far can I go? I'm guessing I would have to see my destination, lest I teleport into a solid object, and that would surely be bad." She says to no one. Looking up, she sees a jet fly high overhead, cracks a small smile, and focuses her vision on the underbelly. Her vision narrows, blurs and for a brief instant she's hugging the underside of a 757! She then begins falling, from some 30,000 feet up.

"Sh...sh...sh...shit! C...c...c...cold up he...he...here!" As her vision slowly goes black from hypoxia. After a minute she comes to, still falling, the ranch where she parked some 9000 feet below.

She resists the urge to scream, but she hopes that those cuts she gave herself were only the tips of the iceberg, having not really thought this whole stupid stunt through.

'Well, if I heal, hopefully the fall will only hurt like hell. But damn girl, abducted by aliens, fucked senseless by a hot fighter pilot, my virginity gone forever and now falling to a certain death after kissing the bottom of a passing jet!' She thinks as the ground gets closer and closer. Flattening her self out, she rolls onto her back, so she can't see the end and says a silent prayer to St. Michael. "THWUMP!" As she lands on the caliche field of the pad site near her Jeep. Her vision goes black on impact, the pain so sudden she didn't even have a chance to scream. Lucky for her, no one saw her fall or land, only a few steers seeing the sudden puff of white dust from her collision with Terra firma...

She coughs once as she swats away a few flies that were landing on her sweat stained face, trying to gather the moisture there. She sits up slowly, looking around where she landed. She wiggles her toes and balls her hands into fists. Sighing that everything still works, she gets to her feet. Pulling her cell phone from the holder on her waist, she sees the shattered face and sighs.

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"Well, not everything repairs itself." She sighs, tossing it into her Jeep. Turning the key through the open window, she looks at the clock. 8pm.
"Ok, I left Roxie's at 5:45pm, it took an hour to get out here, then 30 minutes running and porting all over, so call time of death around 7:30. So, it took my body 30 minutes to recover from a fall from 33,000 feet." She says softly, doing the math. She sits down as what she's thinking just sounds so crazy! But here she is, a living skid mark on the underbelly of a jet and a survivor of the 33,000 foot fall. Leaning back against the front tire, she hangs her head and cries, the moment completely overwhelming her...

Amanda sits there for the rest of the early evening, dragging her sleeping bag out of the back of her Jeep, and laying beside it as night falls.

"Maybe they'll come back, and give me some answers." She says to her Jeep. She lays there most of the night and into the early morning hours when a serious craving for a cheeseburger shakes her back to reality.

"Or maybe not." She sighs. She figures she's just a lucky experiment, one that survived all the probing and tests, and with some neat new abilities to show for it.

Driving back toward home, she stops at the Whataburger in Alice. As she pulled into the parking lot, her headlights shined across 4 figures near the rear of the parking lot; 3 Hispanic males beating up a smaller black male. Throwing her Jeep into 'park', she jumped out and into the fray. She had almost no training in hand to hand combat, but as she waded in, she found herself kicking, punching and throwing the three much bigger boys around like rag dolls.

Spinning to her left, she threw a well placed front kick into the groin of the biggest boy, him doubling over from the pain, then spinning off of him, clenching her fists together and delivering a powerful 'polish hammer' into the jaw of the brute to her left, grabbing his shirt front and launching herself up, over and behind his staggered form, spinning to face the last one, as he pulled out a switchblade.

Extending the blade with a 'schnick!' he lunged at her, sinking the blade deep into her abdomen, she feigning a mortal wound, then delivering a 1, 2, 3 rabbit punch to the stunned brute's jaw. Stepping back, she grabbed the handle of his knife, and pulled it free of her gut, the wound healing in seconds. His eyes went wide as he suddenly crossed himself as she set her stance, and bade him to attack her. He merely grabbed his two buddies and they fled.

Turning to the man they had been attacking, she finds him curled up on the ground, holding his stomach, blood oozing past his fingers. He'd been stabbed at least 3 times, and was now bleeding out. Kneeling beside him, a thought crosses her mind.

"What if my healing is universal? What if I can heal others too?" She says softly to herself. Rolling him onto his back, she shushes him and moves his hands aside, so she can see the damage. Laying her hands on his wounds, she starts thinking about healing him. Her hands begin to glow a soft white color, and after a few minutes, his wounds are gone. He looks up at her, shock and amazement playing across his features.

"Wh...who are you? Are you an angel?" He asks, as he also crosses himself. She stops and thinks about this. 'What if I am? What if I was chosen to help set the world right? What if I really am an angel?'

"You just lie still. Give your body a chance to recover." She said, trying to buy herself some time to think. If she really was given these powers, they were given to her for a reason. She had always liked the thought of one person trying to make a difference. Maybe that was now her calling.

"If I am an angel, I assume you don't see any wings." She said confidently.
"Did you lose them?"
"No, I have to earn them, by doing a world's worth of good deeds. You are the first, and god willing, you won't be the last."
"Do...do you have a name?"
She thought about this for a short moment before blurtling out something she knew she could have thought out better, but after running it through her head a half dozen times, she decided she liked it.
"I am called Angelina. But, you can call me Angie."

"Wow, a real live angel." He said, reaching up and stroking her cheek. She held his hand in hers, then stood, helping him to his feet. "What did those boys want with you?" She asked, but was surprised when she heard two different answers, one verbal and one in her mind.

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"I dunno, I'm new to Alice." He said.

'Damn Pendejos are jealous because I boned some sweet Latin hoe last night, and she was a sister to one of them. She loved it though.' Is what she heard in her mind, as though she had just read his mind!

"I see. Well, try to keep your cock in your pants next time, and maybe they won't beat you senseless, Pendejo." She said with a sly smile.

"Oh Damn! You really ARE an angel! You read my mind! Damn! I'm sorry, I shouldn't have lied! Please, forgive me!"

"Done. Now, I'm no guardian angel, that's a whole other division upstairs. I'm like an angel in training. Run along, and keep it in your pants, ok?"

He did so, waving back to her as he ran off. Looking around, she saw she was alone in the parking lot, and moved back to her car. Climbing in, she drove through the drive through, put in her order and was soon back on the road to Corpus.

Looking down at Earth from their currently cloaked position in La Grange 3, Iris turned to her professor, Mannis.

"So, our experiment is off to a stellar start. She fancies herself an angel. How long until full manifestation of all she'll be able to do occurs?"

"4 more of this worlds revolutions. Her brain is slowly acclimating itself to it's new found ability at full access." Mannis replied, adjusting their position to continue monitoring their subject.

"What do we do with her after she is fully aware? Kill her?"

"Nonsense. She has a remarkable sense of right vs wrong. I say we leave her here, and return in 25 of this planet's solar transitions. Set course for Epsilon 3, Arkadea. Titania will be expecting our report and we still need to find Lorelei. Assuming she wants to be found that is."

"Course laid in, Commander."

"Proceed. We have much to do. Much to do indeed..."

"Ok, so now I'm an angel in training. Damn, I can't stay here. Not with all I can do. I'm wasting my talents trying to go explore stars, considering NASA still uses Wile E. Coyote technology." She says to the little stuffed Penguin in the passenger seat. It was the boss penguin from the Madagascar movies.

"Time to say my goodbyes."

Wheeling up to an ATM machine, she slots her debit card and checks her account balance.

$3,065.36

"Hmm, must be the loan for summer classes. Good, I'll need the money." Driving back to her apartment, she sees Vicki's Mustang out front and a Miata in the driveway.

'Oh boy, she has yet another date. God this girl is the queen of one night stands.' She thinks to herself as she unlocks the door and walks in. Surprisingly, there's no one on the floor on the living room, but then a scream of pain rips through the duplex! Amanda runs for the bedrooms, kicking open the door to Vicki's bedroom and finding Vicki tied to her bed and a guy standing over her cutting her stomach open!

"Nooo! She screams, throwing her hands up in front of her, but before she can charge the brute, he goes flying off of Vicki as though he were just hit by a truck! He crashes into and through her closet doors and lands in a crumpled heap atop her shoe collection.

Moving to the bed, she sees Vicki is bleeding badly and unconscious.

Laying her hands atop the wounds, she concentrates, willing the wounds to heal. Her hands glow with that same soft white light, and all of Vicki's injuries heal as though they were never there. She doesn't wake up though. Checking her for a pulse, she finds one, and guesses that she is still out cold from the shock.

Moving into the closet, she grabs the would-be rapist/murderer and drags him out the front door, then, looking out across the bay to the blinking light of a drill platform, she thinks about sending him to it, and he disappears!

"Awesome! I can teleport others as well as myself. This is just way too cool." Running back inside, she checks on Vicki, who's still unconscious, unites her hands and feet, throws away the rope and packs her duffel. Writing a quick note, she explains that she's off to Huntsville for the summer on an internship, and won't be back even after it's over.

A single tear hits the page as she finishes her goodbye. Sending off an email to Professor Matthews, she thanks him for his help, but a family emergency has forced her to return to Madison and it is unlikely she'll be returning to her studies. She then disconnects her
laptop, packs it into its bag, and heads out. 
Looking at the car in the driveway, she looks up and down the street, and, seeing no one, decides to see how much is too much.

Looking again at that light in the bay, she wills the Miata to go to it, and her vision swirls and she finds herself staring up at the night sky.
She looks to her left, and sees an empty driveway, and to her right, the front porch of their duplex.
'Ok, so, really heavy things are still a struggle to teleport. I'll have to practice that more.' She tells herself, as she climbs into her Jeep, and heads for Leopard St, and the cheap motel district.

Fast Forward 60 days...

David Sherman
Mexico Field Desk
Central Intelligence Agency
Langley, VA

Sifting among the piles of data transcriptions, eyes only reports and sat-photos, Dave Sherman looked furiously for the intel his guys on-scene in Reynosa had sent him.

Seated 5 miles due South of the town of McAllen, TX, Reynosa was a hotbed for the Los Zetas, one of the bigger drug cartels plaguing Mexico since the early 2000's. Lately however, there had been scattered reports of Zetas just plain disappearing, that a scarlet haired girl, obviously American, had moved into Reynosa and was teaching students English at a local school, and had been beaten by a few Zetas thugs, and then those thugs disappearing not soon after.

"Ángel del Fantasma?" He said, reading the report. What the hell does that mean?"
"Ghost Angel Boss." Came the reply from his assistant's office, Dale Parker.
"Ok, so, what does that mean?" He asked Dale.

"Well, according to this intel, the Zetas are taking a beating by this white-clad woman who literally, are you ready for this, walks through walls and makes Zetas disappear." Dale finished, as Dave chuckled.
"Maybe some people should stop using their own product. Ok, what else we got going on down there? Is Gulf Cartel still in charge on the coast?"

Home of Eugene Stewardson
12343 Kawihua Drive
Hilo, HI

Surfing through the various images the Hubble had taken in the last few hours, Gene was thoroughly bored. Once you've seen one gaseous nebula and supernova shell, you've seen them all. He sent an email to space control, asking if they could task Hubble to shoot images of the moon. He had his reply an hour later.
On his desktop was Luna, in all of her splendor, as he began bit-mapping the viewable surface, crater by crater, across the Sea of Tranquility. 45 minutes of mapping later, he began the arduous task of scanning each bitmap, looking for photographic anomalies. Two hours and half a pot of coffee later, on frame 37, he spotted something. Blowing up the image, he grabbed his magnifying glass off the edge of his desk.
Looking closely through it, he tried to make out the image.
"Damn, what is that?" He said to no one. Taking a print-out of the image, he threw on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, hopped into his dune buggy and drove to the observatory.

"Hey Kona, look at this image, tell me I'm seeing things!" He said to his old friend, nicknamed Kona for his style of surfing, lots of turns and twists, as he rides the wave front.
"Hey Gene, what's shakin'? You abusing the poor Hubble again?"
"Man, seriously, blow up this image or zoom in on it's coordinates, and tell me I'm seeing things." He said, handing over the image. Kona fed it to his scanner, but when he couldn't make it out, he fed the co-ords to the array, and looked through the aperture. His eyebrows shot way up.
"Who else has seen this photo?" He asked his friend, as he picked up the receiver to his land line.
"You're the first man. So, am I dreaming?"
"Yes, this is Matthews at Mauna Kea, let me speak to the Director, give him pass-code Icarus."
"Matthews? I thought your name was Manaheia? Gene said looking around as the door behind them opened and when he turned around a dart struck his neck, right at his jugular. He collapsed onto the floor a second later.
"This is Jamison, go ahead."
"Director, Matthews here. We have confirmation of AA. I'm faxing the photo to your secure line now."
"Destroy the original, clean up whoever found it, sanitize and return. Understood?"
"Aye sir. See you in 24." And with that, he hung up the phone. Turning to the two Polynesian strong men he had on retainer, he pointed to the body on the floor.
"Roll him off of curve 32, nice and fast, like he lost it in the curve. Then go to his home, neutralize everyone you find, bring back his computer, take anything valuable as well. It needs to look like a robbery. Got it?" They nodded, the smaller one lifting Gene's body and they both turning and leaving.

He looked again at the image on the screen. Deleting it, he shook his head.
Looking one last time at the grainy image Gene had brought, he looked at the spot he saw with a magnifier.
"Damn, AK-47s on the moon. Who'da thought that was possible?"

12-Aug-2011
Reynosa Elementary

Amanda loved her job. The kids loved her. She hadn't felt this fulfilled in years, and it surely beat sitting in a library studying. The Zetas still tried to make trouble for her kids, but with Angel Del Fantasma on the prowl, the Zetas were slowly losing control of this mid-sized border town.

And the honest Federales, while overtly superstitious, didn't hassle her considering the similarities between the hot Anglo language teacher and 'Ghost Angel'. She made her costume herself, combining a white lace teddy with thigh high white leather boots she found in a dress up catalog, and a long, flowing white cape she made from cotton (outer) and Kevlar (inner). The white eye mask was the final touch, and Ghost Angel was born.

By day, she taught the children of Reynosa, those that still lived here, how to read and speak English, to help them when they moved to the US to find work. By night, she was the cartel busting heroine, Ghost Angel, utilizing her considerable talents to rid the surrounding area of all Zetas she came across. Once, she had to endure a beating because they raided her school during the day, and her cover had to be maintained. But that night, using her ability to hear thoughts, tracked the guilty Zetas to their safe-house, and sent them all to meet Luna. She hoped no one looked at the moon surface anytime soon, or they'd see the small pile of weapons slowly accumulating up there. She took all the money she found, teleported all the drugs 150 miles straight up, and left.

The cash she used to help the head master of her school buy books, claiming that she simply wired her daddy, telling him she needed money for a good cause, and because her daddy loved his little girl, would basically give her anything she asked for. The fact that her father was a fairly well off dairy farmer in Wisconsin notwithstanding, she had to explain the thousands of dollars she was donating to the school somehow.

Of all the things she did miss however, was Dagger. She'd been virtually a Nun since she arrived in Reynosa, as most of the cute guys were either spineless because of the Zetas or were Zetas themselves. She didn't have a contact number for him, and calling Vicki would no doubt raise more questions then she cared to answer. So, she did without. It did suck at times, because that one day really left it's mark on her, and she kinda understood Vicki's position on sex.
"You do only live once." She said, as she set out the quiz sheets for the next class...

"Hey Vicki!" Dagger yelled to her over the loud music at Roxie's. She turned and smiled to him when she saw who it was. He pulled her into a hug and whisper-yelled into her ear.
"Where's my girlfriend?"
"Huntsville! Internship with NASA!" She yelled back. He looked dejected.
"Didn't you give her your cell number?"
"No, I forgot. You got hers?"
"Yeah, but she must be in an area with no signal, she never calls me back. Want her email?"
"Yeah, if you don't mind." Vicki took out her order pad and a pen, scribbled something quick, and handed it to him.
"Gotta get back to work! Good luck!" She said, disappearing behind the bar and pouring drinks. Dagger left a moment later.

Sitting out in his car, he fired up his net-book, and sent off an email, which immediately came back with a vacation message.

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"Hi, this is Amanda, I'll be teaching under-privileged children in Mexico for the summer. NASA holds nothing of value or interest for me anymore. Ciao!"

"Mexico? But where in Mexico?" He asked the net-book, trying another email to her. He got the same reply however.

"Hmm, ok, time to play sleuth." He said to the dashboard, and started looking at local news reports for the regional Mexican area. On the third page he found the report of a school teacher being beaten for speaking out against Los Zetas. The image was of Amanda!

"SWEET! Reynosa here I come!" He said as he fired up the Challenger, and tore out of Roxie's parking lot, headed for Mexico.

24 hours later...

Driving most of the night, Dagger eased his car into a motel parking lot. The flashing neon sign, written in spanish, conveyed two simple facts: It was a dive for sure, but they had rooms available. Parking the Challenger, he cut the engine, grabbed his duffel and set the alarm. A few minutes later found him asleep in the somewhat lumpy queen-sized bed in his room.

Amanda seemed tense. She felt something stir in her sub-conscious, as she sat grading her student's papers by the faint light of her desk lamp. Set on it's lowest setting, the glow it gave off shed just enough light to see the papers in front of her and not much else, which is what she preferred these days.

Even though she had sent a fair number of Zetas to meet the moon, their numbers seemed to grow by the day. One she had captured and interrogated had said they were here looking for her, and that a 5 million dollar price had been placed on her (Ghost Angel's) head. After sending him to meet Luna, she shelved her alter ego for a while.

That was two weeks ago.

The stirring in her psyche wouldn't subside, so, pushing aside the papers and lesson plan, she began tracking the feeling she was sensing. It was very familiar to her, though it's immediate significance was still a mystery. She had walked/jogged almost a mile around Reynosa before she came to Hector's parent's Motel, on the edge of town. Spotting a very familiar black Challenger, she ran up to the door in front of it, and peeked in through the partially opened blinds. A tall, well built gringo lay sleeping on his right side on the bed. Looking at his face, she immediately recognized Mike Davis, aka Dagger. Composing herself best she could, she looked down at her choice of night time excursion clothing and gasped. Even overpowered was that feeling, she neglected to get properly dressed before heading out. She giggled at last, knocking on his door with a sly smile. She peeked in again, and saw him rising from the bed, a 9mm pistol in his hand. She gasped, but then realized as an American serviceman in Mexico, he was smart to have brought a gun.

"Yes?" He said through the door.

"Dagger?" She asked, her voice a near whisper. The locks were thrown, and the door flew open suddenly, she coming face to face with him. He lowered the pistol and drug her inside.

"Amanda! Wait, are you staying here too? Did I wake you when I pulled in?" He asked, noting that his car's aftermarket exhaust system made it louder than normal.

"No, don't be silly. Hector, one of my student's, recognized you from my tellings of you, and called me when you checked in. His parent's own this motel." She lied, and did it so convincingly, he believed her! He scooped her into his arms, kissing and hugging her. She eagerly returned both, pushing him backwards towards the bed...

The next morning...

Dagger awoke to Amanda sitting in the only chair in the room, turned to face out the window. She sat there in only her robe, sipping at a cup of coffee. Leaning up on an elbow, he smiled when she turned to face him.

"Got another of those?" He asked with a smile, indicating her coffee.

"You shouldn't be here Mike. It's not safe for you here. Zetas are flooding in everyday, looking for the Angel."

"I know, I read the newspaper reports. If it didn't seem so incredible, so absurdly ridiculous, I'd almost think Ghost Angel was you. The descriptions fit you almost to a T." He said, swinging his legs out of the bed, eying the small coffee maker and moving toward it, pouring himself a small cup of black mud.

She weighed what he said with careful measure. No one knew who she really was, and that secret weighed heavily on her soul. She really did love Mike, though she never told him, but if he had half the intellect she gave him credit for, he'd have figured out her true feelings for him by the way they made love. Not just sex, but true love making.

"What would you say if I told you I was Ghost Angel?" She asked softly, turning back to the window. A small gang of young men had assembled across the street at a local taco stand, some pointing at Mike's shiny Dodge.

"They're planning something!" She thought to herself, as Mike's arms encircled her. She jumped only slightly.

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"I'd say it fits you, but unless you're some super athlete with multiple black belts, which I know you don't have, after talking to your former roommate, I'd say no, I don't think you are." He said finally. She sighed against him, still watching the group across the street. When two of them produced small machine pistols, Amanda knew it was time to go. Being daylight, she couldn't do anything to them, as there would be too many witnesses, so turning in Mike's arms, she hoped he loved her as much as she loved him.

"Mike? Please, try not to judge until we have a chance to sit and actually talk, ok?"

"Talk about whaooooo!" He began, as his view swirled from the dingy motel room to a finely decorated bedroom. Shades of pink and purple adorned every piece in the room, from the 4 post king sized bed to the walls and even the carpet. It had a woman's touch for sure, but what threw him sideways was how he got here. He fell backwards into a sitting position on the bed, sliding onto his lap, straddling his waist. Looking down into his eyes, she could read his mood, mind and emotions. Surprise, love, and shock, to put it mildly. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly to him. They kissed for a long time before she broke it off and looked into his eyes. He smiled back to her.

"You, you aren't surprised how we got here?"

"Honestly, no. It's been a long time since I'd seen anyone with your abilities. Mannis' work no doubt."

"Wait, that name! I know that name!" She said, her turn to be surprised.

"Abducted by aliens, right?" He asked with a sly smile.

"Ye-yeah, how'ed you know?"

"I know them. Intimately you could say. It wasn't until you 'ported across the bar did I recognize Mannis' handy work, since humans on this Earth haven't even scratched the surface of their mental capabilities." He said, letting her out of his hug. She turned a shocked expression to him, then sat back down.

"How do you know of these aliens? I mean, you don't look like them. Hell, they looked almost elven."

"Mannis put me here, on this Earth, to protect me from an off-shoot faction of his people. I lost quite a few good friends in battle against them, including my wife." He said sadly, the grief of that loss playing across his face. She gasped, not just from his loss, but it thoroughly sinking in that he wasn't from 'here'.

"Oooook, so if you aren't from 'here'. as you put it, where are you from?"

"Oh, I'm from Earth, just not THIS Earth. Mannis' people are extremely advanced, and access to alternate dimensions is completely possible for them."

"So, like that old TV show, 'Sliders'?" She asked, still sitting, scanning his mind for any signs of deceit or deception. She found none.

"I'm not totally familiar with all of this world's pop culture yet, so I'll have to take your word on it." He said with a dashing smile. She almost melted.

"Is Mike Davis your real name?" She needed to know, needed to break through whatever mental barrier that was keeping all the knowledge she wanted, no, needed to know from her.

"No, it's my cover identity. Again, Mannis' idea. My real name is Alex Carlson, and MY Earth is three dimensions to the right, so to speak."

"Is your Earth the same as this one?"

"No, mine is about 320 years ahead of yours. I was born April 2, 2301, in Strasbourg, Germany, but soon after my birth, my family moved to Australia. It's the reason for my slight accent."
"I mis-took you for a British ex-patriate. Glad I didn't jump to that conclusion."
Alex/Mike laughed.
"How do you really feel about me?" She asked, since even though she could read his surface thoughts, she wanted to hear him say it. Say that he loved her.
"You, Ms Mittlesohn, have won my heart, and I think with your abilities and my advanced knowledge, I can go home and take back that which was taken. You once thought yourself an angel, well, come home with me, and be that angel. An angel of vengeance. And yes, Mannis and I talk from time to time, hence how I knew of your angelic beliefs."

Amanda thought all of this through with the analytical mind she thought she had forgotten. She was beating herself up here, trying to stop the Zetas, but out there, in the great void, she realized, that was her true calling. Smiling to him, she stripped and began dressing in her Ghost Angel outfit. Turning after pulling on her boots, she caught sight of his erection through his jeans, her most favorite part of his considerable anatomy. Smiling, she sauntered up beside him.
"You like it?" He answered her with a soft kiss, pulling the small medallion from his front pocket, and pressing the faintly glowing green stud on it's shiny surface.
Amanda felt as though every fiber of her being was being torn asunder then reassembled nearly an instant later. Looking around her, she found herself in a finely appointed bedroom, much like her own, though this one had walls that looked like steel.
"Where are we?"
"Home, well, my home. And now your's as well. Welcome aboard the *Richelieu*, Amanda. First and last ship of the line, from her majesty's Imperial fleet, First Terran Empire, Empress Jennifer the First presiding."
"What year is it here?"
"2375." He answered, as the entire western wall turned into a TV screen, the image on the screen throwing Amanda for a loop: What looked to be a ship's bridge, back lit in red, and a humanoid skunk looking at her and Alex!
"Hey Cap! Glad to have you back! All systems are go, and we can leave whenever you say so, whoa! Who's the girl?"
"A friend. Contact Lorelei, let her know we're coming. Set course for her, best speed, Jett."
"Aye Cap, course laid in, Folding in 5."

To be continued in I.C. Volume 7, Coming of the Kanin, Round Two...
Federal Investigations Of Superhumans (FISH) : Villains And Vigilantes

by Alex Davis

Since its inception F.I.S.H. (Federal Investigation of Super Humans) though perhaps burdened by an unfortunate acronym has been devoted to the investigation of those being generally thought of as Super Humans. The most notable of the encounters have nearly always been with FISH agents seeking to redress tactical errors or assisting overwhelmed super individuals apparently engaged in defending the spirit if not the actual laws of the land.

This sort of encounter has nearly always occurred after the imminent danger has passed and when possible after the initial report was filed. These rare encounters are merely the tip of this organization’s iceberg like activities.

FISH differs from CHESS (the Central Headquarters of Espionage for the Secret Service) in several important areas, because of its investigative requirements FISH rarely operates as anything more than subtle advisers to overwhelmed superheroes and is far more likely to be found hours or even days after the fact nosing around the scene of a super battle looking for witness testimony to add to FISH’s extensive files rather than any active participation in an incident. This stems partially from profile requirements all the way down to being a side effect of normal agents operating for decades with limited fiscal resources.

Because of an extensive history of bare survival on a shoestring budget for decades few copies of FISH’s reports have ever been produced or documented until recent events forced other branches of the government to recognize the superior records of the organization.

Part of this success is explained by the agents skills at remaining hidden as well as collecting, compiling, and correlating the data resulted from a project that was similar to the Tactical Studies Rules Project (TSRP for short) for the United States Army.

The Project herein was known as Federal Governing of Unusual Projects (FGUP for short) with much effort on the part of administrators and resistance from the agents to giving up their carefully annotated manuals FGUP succeeded in copying and translating the data to generate this current herein only recently.

F.I.S.H. Files: Is equivalent to the USPD this covers the strange and mundane for the Super powered possibilities

F.I.S.H. Scale : A system for determining relative threat values for superpowers

What is this collection of data: The information you are reviewing is a compilation of innovative ways to really expand upon.

This article is most certainly unlikely to be a stand alone product. For those familiar with V&V 2nd this book is a much easier source of inspiration to use than for those more intimate with other systems.

This information should be viewed as close to an endless of a source of inspiration as possible, literally some of the most unusual and interesting scenarios and forms of powers over the decades of super power usage have been unearthed in order to continue to help expand the comics and gaming universes possibly even science itself may be expanded simply by encouraging creative thought in new ways.
United We Stand: Mutants And Masterminds

by Karl Brown

Threatened with extinction from beyond:
- Governments unleash secret programs,
- Corporations rush breakthrough technologies to the field,
- Secret societies step out of the shadows,
- Sleeping gods wake!

United we stand is a setting outline for Mutants and Masterminds Third Edition (MnM) a super-hero genre rpg by Steve Kenson of Green Ronin Publishing. This is the first of two articles. Though written for MnM the approach described in this pair of articles could be used with many super hero RPGs. This article introduces the setting outline and acts as a player’s guide. Another short article with give guidance for the referee. These two articles are not a detailed campaign setting but an outline that enables you to work up a detailed setting during play using the real world as a familiar foundation. The only book required to use this article is the Hero’s Handbook (HH), the core book for the game. I do reference other books for the game but they are not required to use this article. One of the pro’s of MnM is that you could run games for years using only the Hero’s Handbook. Most page numbers (p) refer to the Hero’s Handbook. All the referenced material is also within the newer Deluxe edition. Other books referenced are the Supernatural Handbook (SH), Cosmic Handbook (CH), Gamesmaster’s Guide (GG) and Threat Report (TR). These additional books are not required to use this article.

Goals

Create a setting that:
➢ Embraces the diversity and creative freedom of mainstream comic universes,
➢ Showcases how Mutants and Masterminds (MnM) models that diversity,
➢ Is quickly understood by players,
➢ Is a universe that is our own to mess with without worrying about canon,
➢ Where the PCs are not in the shadow of established canon heroes,
➢ And is fun to play in.

Additionally, this article provides help in building characters to those new to Mutants and Masterminds.

Background

Up until the real date you start playing the game world seems to be identical to the real world from the point of view of the typical citizen. There is no known history of superheroes or of proven strange powers. On the real date you start play this all changes. An alien armada is detected as a bright flash as it comes out of hyperspace just beyond the Oort cloud at the very edge of the solar system. For a second a new super-bright star appears in the night sky of Earth then is gone. Eleven days after the flash radio broadcast message easily detected by ham radio buffs the world over is detected on multiple frequencies and in multiple languages, it plays in a loop:

“We will make all these world like our own. Your biochemistry is not compatible with the conditions we will create. You are unable to resist. Extinction is inevitable.”

Powerful telescopes are able to track the flare of the aliens slower than light drive or drives. Drive(s) that are incredibly powerful are driving the ship or fleet toward the solar system. Doing the math our experts realise that unless the aliens stop they will be near Earth in about 5 years.
All around the world powerful groups begin to respond to this message. Public unrest and crime begin to soar providing a proximal problem for the first few adventures. The situation soon leads to a no-holds bared environment where powerful organisations invest everything they have into maintaining control (or seizing it) and then countering the alien threat. Governments prepare to launch nuclear weapons and activate top-secret psi programs, corporations rush breakthrough devices into the field, criminal organisations try to profit from the chaos, rebels cause riots, secret societies of arcane power move to repel the invaders, and ancient sleeping gods stir in their slumber when they sense a great threat.

That’s it. You want more background make it up. Just remember that any differences from the real world are unknown to the general public before the alien threat.

Heroes!

For me the main attraction of the super hero genre is the breadth of creative freedom when it comes to creating characters. This minimalist setting is really just a set of guidelines into which a great variety of character origins can be slotted. We assumed the standard starting power level (PL) for MnM because most published material is geared to this level. At PL10 characters are much more powerful than those of other genres and even those from other super hero games. One of the advantages of MnM is that it is built to accommodate powerful characters, just to give you an idea of the kind of power you should be aiming for in a character concept starting characters might be able to lift an Airbus A380 or run at over 100 000kph. You could still build an ‘unpowered’ Batman or Daredevil style vigilante but this person would have incredible skill levels and/or resources.

Heroes are only limited by power level, power points, and a campaign specific set of limits that describe what the best unmodified humans can achieve.

Unmodified Humans

To ensure that the world’s history seems like ours on the surface and to give super-humans a chance to shine unmodified humans are limited as below. These limits are one rank better than real-world Olympians.

Most Abilities: 4
Awareness: 6
Fighting: 15
Presence: 6
Speed: 5
Defences: all 15.
Initiative: 10
Skills: Maximum bonus 15. Note this is the total bonus not the rank.

Most PC’s will have some kind of technological, biological, or paranormal source of powers that enables them to exceed some or all of these limits. Ideally, if the PC is a human any ability that is to exceed these limits should not be added to the ability directly but through a power. For example to create a super-human with strength 10 assign STR up to four then create a power complete with descriptors etc. to add six more STR. If you are using a pre-created archetype (HH34+) then this guideline would not have been followed for these characters. To fix this if you character is human simply declare the excess points are an Enhanced Trait (HH106) and add descriptors (the point cost is the same even if the effect is permanent). Alternatively, you might be an alien.

Concept/Background
In this setting where there are almost no limits on your background. When it comes to creating super heroes the sheer amount of free choice is both a joy and a curse. Without a solid concept to guide your choices, choice paralysis is inevitable. Work through the core rules HH30-33 to determine your:

- Name
- Origin
- Appearance
- Personality
- Goals

Then you will need to determine at least two
Complications HH27-29. The complications rules are very flexible they can represent loved ones, disability, horrific appearance, even being a dog.

Players and the referee should feel free to make up all manner or strange cults, advanced technology etc. to fit back-stories with one restriction, all of these must be very secret before the alien transmission is received.

Stuck for ideas? Consider the following broad categories of heroes:

**Elite**

Most PCs are likely to be elite individuals. Armies will choose their best soldiers to make better, secret societies of psychics or wizards will urge their most powerful members to step out of the shadows, and the most brilliant minds will use machines or super-science to become heroes. The Ray Gun hero (CH39), Battle Suit (HH35), Crime Fighter (HH37), Gadgeteer (HH39), Martial Artist (HH40), Mystic (HH42), Psychic (HH45), Weapon Master (HH49) and Warrior (HH48) are good examples.

**Larger Than Life**

Stuck for ideas? One advantage of the setting is that you can imagine that larger-than-life real people might become heroes, or villains. Good candidates are those that have access to wealth and/or power as well as one or more above average attributes. J. Craig Venter, Paris Hilton, Richard Branson, Prince Harry, Vladimir Putin, and Usain Bolt are all good candidates.

**Everyday Heroes**

The ordinary person who gains super-powers is a harder concept to incorporate into this setting. There is no effect such as a ‘mutant gene’ or ‘energy wave’ that gives a proportion of the population) powers at random. This is deliberate to create the feeling that the heroes are unique with some special role to play in the coming invasion. However, two origin types might grant powers to ordinary people.

Accident: as corporations, universities, and nations rush the testing and development of experimental technology the chances of haste causing an accident increases, perhaps empowering scientists, technicians or even the cleaners. Archetypes which focus on powers rather than skills are a good fit for this concept. Examples include: Energy
Controller (HH38), Mimic (HH41), Powerhouse (HH44), and Psychic (HH45).

Endowment: sleeping gods and demons stir and see their Earthly domains under threat. Who knows why the weird and fickle minds of ancient deities choose to gift ordinary people with great power, perhaps they see destiny.

The Cursed Adventurer (SH37) and Infected Hero (SH39) are especially appropriate. However, with the right backstory those listed for Accident could easily be used in this category.

Hidden among us

Another idea is the hero is a non-human hidden on Earth, perhaps in plain sight. Examples include: shape-shifting aliens, Faeries hidden by glamour, secretly psychic dolphins, ethereal ghosts, and genetically engineered animals buried in secret labs. A lot of these concepts will have complications related to physical limitations. For example the complication of ‘Dolphin’ would come up every time the PCs powers and allies can't compensate for lack of hands, inability, to walk etc.

Heralds from the Stars

Perhaps the invaders are not the only aliens to come to Earth. Your PC could be a herald from an advanced spacefaring alien civilisation sent to aid humanity or maybe just a mercenary who will help for a price. The Cosmic Corsair (CH36) would be a good example of the later. Alien Paragons (HH43) are a genre staple but an alien herald could be much stranger than either of these archetypes. The PCs could even be part of a small force of helpful aliens, you could apply one of the Alien Templates (CH45) to all members of the same species.

Character Creation

After you have a fully detailed concept only then are you ready to create your character. Like many other super hero genre rpg’s, MnM enables a great diversity of super powers by giving players access to design tools normally only seen by the designers of more class-based rpgs. For those new to super hero gaming the system resembles the points based system of GURPS. Every hero is a brand new ‘class’ that must conform to certain mechanical limits particularly those imposed by the power level (HH23). MnM character creation can be simple or quite involved, particularly if you want an array of flexible powers but there are ways to simplify and speed up the process.

Power Stunts

One way characters can get overly complex is when players try to assign points to every conceivable use of their powers. Don’t do this. Just assign points to the core one to three uses of your power, the ones you will use every session. Everything else can be covered by power stunts (HH20). These are one-off tricks allowing you to use your power in an unusual way. Say your character is Major Voltage. You mostly want to blast villains with lightning and short out electronics so at character creation assign points to those. Then during play say you come across a man dead from a heart attack, you want to use your electricity control to jump-start his heart, no problem it’s a power stunt. Power stunts use up a game resource called Hero Points (see ‘Recovery’ MnM21), so if you find yourself using a particular stunt often during play it’s worth spending a few xp on it.

Descriptors

Every power has descriptors. Is your flight power due to a jet pack, telekinesis, magic levitation, or what? Every power should have at least one descriptor and in most cases I’d want to see two or more. The rules tell you what effect the power has, descriptors tell us how. This can be important, does the villain’s magnetic dampening field negate your flight power? Can you use a power stunt with your blast power to start a forest fire? This is important, take time to jot
down descriptors for each of your powers.

Archetypes

Archetypes are a quick way of generating heroes of common types.

All the archetypes in the core rulebook are suitable but you will need to describe the background of your hero, add descriptors to the powers, and complications. It might be better to avoid shapeshifter, mystic, and mimic concepts that require some work to detail their variable powers and create a short ‘spellbook’ of commonly used options. If your character has multiple forms, or if you go outside of the options given with the archetype, then you need to check all forms against the power level limits. Only a few of the archetypes given in the supplements the correct power level for this setting (PL10).

Simple Characters

If you have a character with only a few skills, powers, and advantages investing most of your allowed power points in just a few places, then you could easily create your character on paper from scratch by hand. When you are done be sure to check your creation against the power level limits (HH23) and tweak if required.

Templates

The Templates (SH44, CH45) are helpful for quickly allocating a portion of the power points available to you.

HeroLab

A very flexible way to design characters is with HeroLab, a character design computer program. Hero Lab provided alerts for when you break the limits and gives optional advice on building a character. However, Herolab does not guarantee you are within the rules, its pretty good but there are a few things it misses. For example it will let you create combat skills that are too broad. HeroLab offers no guidance for Expertise skills often resulting in expertise skills that are too narrow. Be sure to check out the rules for these skills.

Play

Once play begins the world of the game will begin to diverge from the real world. The referee article for this setting will provide a broad outline of the progression of the campaign but much of the details and the tone will come from the kind of characters you make and the actions they undertake in play. How do they feel about the news of invasion? Do they try to work with the authorities or do they mistrust the government? Do they feel that great responsibility come with their abilities or does the power go to their heads? What about the people they care about? Are your characters true heroes or are they normally flawed and crack under the stress?
United We Stand : Referee's Guide

by Karl Brown

United we stand is a setting outline for Mutants and Masterminds Third Edition (MnM) a super-hero genre rpg by Steve Kenson of Green Ronin Publishing. This is the second of two articles. Though written for MnM the approach described in this pair of articles could be used with many super hero RPGs. This article gives guidance for the referee. The only book required to use this article is the Hero’s Handbook (HH), the core book for the game. I do reference other books for the game but they are not required to use this article. Most page numbers (HH) refer to the Hero’s Handbook. All the referenced material is also within the newer Deluxe edition. Other books referenced are the Supernatural Handbook (SH), Cosmic Handbook (CH), Gamesmaster’s Guide (GG) and Threat Report (TR). These additional books are not required to use this article.

Referee

The starting conditions of the setting are incredibly detailed and yet you and your players are very familiar with most of the setting, it’s the real world. Once the alien announcement occurs though all kinds of secrets come to light. While the setting is deliberately vague so you can make it your own, I will give some advice on how to make it work at the table.

The Secret History

During character creation the backstories the players invent for the PCs will provide some ideas for the secret history of the world. It’s your job to gradually invent and reveal additional details of the world’s secret histories. You will probably want to invent rival hidden cults, old gods, and secret government programs to challenge the PCs. The Supernatural Handbook has a Time Periods in Horror (SH16) section that might be helpful.

Ramping up the strange

It is very important that at the start of the campaign the world is apparently exactly like the real world and then the alien transmission is received.

Once the game starts the situation on Earth deviates slowly from the real world.

At the start of the game we get the message from the invaders and we can track the flares of their drives but we know little about them:

➢ Hyperdrive appears to function only outside the heliopause, beyond the solar system. They probably can’t just hyper-jump into Earth orbit.
➢ The sublight drive or drives if not a reaction drive produces a lot of light and radiation, enough to be detected by real-world astronomy facilities.
➢ At current acceleration it is expected to take about 5 years before they cross Earth orbit.
➢ That’s it. We have no pictures of the ship, we don’t even know if it is one ship or a fleet in formation.

This early phase of the campaign is a transition from reality to comic book reality. It is characterised by a distant threat, local unrest, and crime. Unless the players have the power to travel to the far edge of the solar system and take on the aliens, they will probably begin by working to calm panic and respond to rioting and looting. This done they will encounter other groups trying to do the same thing, and still others trying to seize power during the chaos. Groups vying for control will include governments, the UN, religions, terrorist groups, and then a little later secret societies, powered megalomaniacs, awakened old gods etc. Introduce these groups in a rough order of strangeness. The idea is to introduce the differences from the real world at a pace the players can absorb them.

It is very important that by the end of this phase the player know how common Supers are and how powerful their
characters are in relation to other supers, mundane governments, and other groups. I’m not going to tell you the answers to these questions, it’s up to you. Discuss it with your players if you like. You might make the players the top five supers on the planet with no-one else even close, they must save the world! Alternatively, for a more complex plot there are hundreds of similarly powered supers and few more powerful than the PCs. The PCs must unite a substantial fraction of the world’s supers to stop the invasion.

The player’s might wonder why the aliens revealed their intentions with a transmission. Well it might be gloating in the best comic book villain tradition or it could be that having encountered balkanised ‘primitive’ cultures before they know the chaos and panic caused by the warning will lead to infighting and reduce the ‘primitives’ ability to resist invasion.

Somewhere during this phase the players will begin to realise the implications of the power they wield. They might happily stay within the expectations gleaned from comics or they might begin to explore the implications and impact of supers. For example in the comic books powerful supers respect the authority of the government and try not to upset the world's status quo. However in your game the PCs may try to push governments around. They might water the deserts to feed Africa, stop wars (or start them), sell powerful technology to consumers etc. What will be the implications of these actions? If your player go down this road you could handle it in one of several ways; you could talk to the players out of character and suggest they get back in genre, you could use opposing supers (if there are any) to shut down such actions and limit the changes to the world, or you could run with it and roll out the permutations.

First Assault

At some point, perhaps quite early on if the PCs have advanced space-travel, the PCs will try for an assault on the aliens. I’m not going to tell you what the aliens are like but you should create some ideas before even starting the campaign. The only two really important things about the first assault are:

1. The PCs are obviously outgunned and fail. Design an alien threat the PCs cannot possibly beat. Show them the threat and let them retreat perhaps after getting injured. If they persist run an exciting fight scene kill off an ally, and send clear signals that the PCs are threatened, something like “the alien beam weapon could cut through your power suit like a hot knife through butter, if it hits you you’re dead”. After that play fair but don’t hold back, be prepared to kill a PC. If you want you could adopt one or more of the high PL mega-villains from the Cosmic Handbook (CH55). Remember though the aliens do not like the conditions on the Earth, be sure to note most of the alien population requires alien conditions to thrive.

2. The aliens will not bargain, they might not even communicate with us again after the first transmission. They cannot be convinced to deviate from their plan. They are going to re-make the Earth and other planets of the Solar System as new homeworlds and in doing so make the Earth hostile to humans driving us to extinction.

These two facts establish the invaders as the ultimate threat and forms the hook the rest of the campaign hangs off. Change either of these two central ideas and the whole thing will fall apart.

Be sure that the players know that you’re quite happy to run an apocalyptic game where the aliens win and begin changing the world and exterminating all Earth-life, or even one where only a handful of humanity survive a very fast transformation of the Earth by escaping into space. Don’t just feed the characters this information, tell the players out of character in no uncertain terms that you are ready to go down this route.

“Ok, so now your heroes know the stakes, here’s the thing. You can win but you can also lose. Out of character I am telling you now failure is an option. I am prepared to run adventures where you have failed, pretty much everything your character cares about is destroyed, and you have to survive the aftermath of the apocalypse if you can. The gloves are off people.”

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Space

The Cosmic Handbook contains additional rules that are useful in outer space including: Surviving in space (CH17), quantifying interplanetary distances, masses, and damage levels in game terms (CH20, 25), and optional rules for sensors and communications in space (CH24-27).

A horror tone?

The Supernatural Handbook (SH) has a lot of advice that might be helpful across this campaign. There is definitely room for a horror mood to some of the sessions, increasing so at later stages. In this first stage a “Touch of Horror” (SH7) could work quite well. On the other hand too much of a focus on horror will dilute out the daring-do of comic book super heroes. A horror tone is especially appropriate if the PCs fail to prevent the invasion and transformation of the Earth.

What if the heroes win?

If you don’t design a sufficient threat, perhaps you are new to MnM or your players are smarter then you, don’t cheat them of their victory. Keep playing fair let them win if that’s what the dice god decrees. Then think about your objective here. The article is written as an aid to building your group a super’s world to play in. You could easily skip to the Denouement phase described below and use the action so far as the foundation of your world. However, maybe you want to mix up and flesh out the world a bit more. Maybe you just really wanted to run the invasion campaign. Well you could ‘reveal’ this first threat was just an ‘advance pacification fleet’ and the bulk of the alien population will arrive from interstellar space soon! Done right, this can seem like a consistent ramping up of the threat. Just don’t try this twice, it will really feel like railroading if you do. The new arrivals will probably expect to find a pacified Earth and humanity extinct. They could be more numerous than the first fleet but consist of planet-reformers and colonists as well as security forces.

What if they bug out?

Supers with interstellar or dimensional travel when faced with a superior alien threat might cut and run leaving the Earth to defend itself. Fine, let them run the cowards. Run a couple of outer-space/dimensional adventures then lead them back to Earth to let them see the destruction they let happen. See The Invasion below for some ideas but this campaign might end up being slightly different. Supers in space with the destruction of Earth a painful memory. Alternatively, perhaps Earth is not the only world threatened!

United we Stand

It is very important after the initial phase of the campaign that multiple groups are competing for control of the Earth, that the players realise that the aliens are not going to stop and cannot be stopped unless an alliance of Earths powered heroes and even maybe villains joins forces. Using a combination of force and diplomacy the PCs must unite the Earth. If they are the only supers they need the backing and resources of the world’s governments to overcome the threat you designed earlier. If there are other Supers the PCs must form alliances to gather together enough power to defeat the aliens.

This process should not be easy, some governments will continue with futile attempts at appeasing the invaders, fundamentalist terrorist groups will unleash their own supers, rogue governments will take advantage of the chaos, super villains will try to conquer the world to save it. As the PCs overcome these threats and conduct diplomacy they gain experience and grow in power. Both power growth of PCs and alliances are factors needed to overcome the alien threat that was originally designed to defeat them.
D-Day

Eventually, the PCs and their allies take the fight to the aliens or perhaps defend the Earth when the aliens arrive. Either way be sure to make this an epic battle. You have been building this up since the beginning so holding back will only disappoint. Be sure to signal again to the PCs and the players that failure can happen with terrible consequences. Kill off a few high-powered allies early on to let the players know the safety net has been taken away. Don’t be afraid to kill PCs, I recommend you play hard and fair so the players feel they are at risk and can die just as easily as succeed. Be sure to ‘flag’ threats fairly so anyone killed does not feel cheated and be sure the threats you flag have the game-rule punch to be as dangerous as they appear. Ideally, each of the aliens’ elite should be powerful individuals that alone are a match for several PCs or allied NPCs.

From the D-Day stage of the campaign onwards the section on Allegorical Horror (SH58) is very appropriate.

Denouement

Assuming the PCs beat back the invaders, take a final session to wind things up. Be sure to feature funerals and speeches around those who gave their last to defend the Earth. Spend a little time to describe who is running the world now and reflect how everyday life changed since the campaign start now that supers are unleashed on the world and an alien invasion has been stopped.

This is normally where the game ends but if everyone is keen to continue your group now has a comic-book reality you are all familiar with to play in.

The Invasion

What if the aliens are not stopped? What exactly will the aliens do to the Earth (and other worlds of our solar system)? Well that’s up to you. Perhaps they will make the world freezing cold or molten hot, poison the atmosphere, irradiate the rock, transform the world into toxic ‘unobtanium’ or any combination of these and anything else you think up. The important thing is they can’t be bargained with and if they win it is the end of our world. The effect on the Earth could be fast acting resulting in the PCs and other survivors cast out into outer space. Alternatively the transformation of the Earth takes a little time giving the PCs a chance to limit the damage after the invasion.

The Supernatural Handbook has some rules useful for a transformed Earth. The game becomes a Post-apocalyptic/Armageddon one (SH9,21) with the remains of humanity and supers targeted for extermination or enslaved (SH14). The toxicity rules could also be useful (SH68).
Super Squadron Rules Updates

by Joe Italiano

I am working on a second edition of Super Squadron. This include rule updates (including gaining more powers are you go up in experience), more spells, universe background, an alternative to random character generation utilizing a point purchase system (I think we originally published this in Multiverse #6), etc. There have been various updates in both the Tome and Super Science as well as the run of the Multiverse magazine which will all be integrated.

Critical Hits

The base chance for a critical hit is 1%. For every 30% of modified hit chance, the player has a base +1% Critical hit chance. (Critical hits are now based on the modified hit chance of the attacking character.)

Dice Rolls

When a player character generates statistics, power, spell or gimmick numbers, all 1’s are re-rolled.

Luck Factor:

For player characters, minimum luck factor is “1” irrespective of their roll.

Power bonuses with Experience

Every time a character goes up a level, there is a base ((4*Exp level since last increase) + LK)% of the character gaining a related power. So for a character with a luck factor of 1, they would have a ((4*1) + 1) % = 5% chance of gaining a related power. If the character fails the roll, when they gain their second level, they gain an additional 4% chance for their next roll. EG: ((4*2) + 1) % = 9%, and so on (adding another 4% to the chance until they make the roll. Once they make they roll, their chance to gain a related power resets to the base chance of ((4*1) + 1) % = 5%.

Related powers via Experience

Every time a character goes up a level, they have a chance of gaining a related power. Related powers gained via experience are chosen by the character. A character can gain any “new” related power once, but are restricted in how many times they can take the “same” related power in subsequent successful rolls. The number of times a character can take the “same” related power is identical to the number of times the character began with that power. For example: If character a began with Enhanced Agility x 3 and Armour x 1, they could take an Enhanced Agility related power (including Enhanced Agility) three times, but they could only take Armour as a related power once.

Whenever a character gains a related power, the GM has the option to also give a defect. Defect/s should be proportionate to the new abilities gained.
Enhanced Charisma

Action Point Cost: N.A. 
Damage per AP cost: N.A. 
Maximum AP Expenditure: N.A. 
Duration: Permanent 
Area of Effect: Personal 
Range: N.A. 
Device AP: N.A. 
Device Range: N.A. 

Power Explanation: The character adds 2d10 to their Charisma rating.

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<th>SV # (PC)</th>
<th>Reaction Hero *</th>
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<td>-30%</td>
<td>+35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>67-100</td>
<td>Awesome (2) 65-97</td>
<td>-35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>101+</td>
<td>Drop Dead Gorgeous (3) 98+</td>
<td>-40%</td>
<td>+50%</td>
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* These figures modify the initial reaction rolls when the characters meet.
# When using the PC SV table, reverse positive/negative signs on the NPC tables.

Luck will modify this roll in the characters favour.
Charisma can increase during the game. For every three points of PS gained CH increase by one point. Charisma never decreases, even if the PS rating drops dramatically. However CH gain is not possible until the previous PS rating is again reached and surpassed by three points.

1. The character gains the power Emotion Control but only controls Emotions revolving around love/desire/jealousy
2. The character gains the power Emotion Control again. The character now has Emotion Control power in full plus Emotions revolving around love/desire/jealousy are at power x 2. (The character can determine the type that the factor 2 power levels take).
3. The character gains the power Emotion Control again. The character now has Emotion Control power x 3 plus Emotions revolving around love/desire/jealousy are at power level 3. (The character can determine the type that the factor 3 power levels take).
I’ve been working on Verge: The Multiverse for some time now, and its coming to close being out of formalized playtesting and into proof reading and all those other final stages of role-playing game production. Employing the system I designed for Frankenstein Atomic Frontier, Verge is a bit of a twist on the traditional roleplay game in that each player takes the role of a single character – designed by the Game Master. Much of the choice for character creation in Verge comes when the players design their own unique reality, termed an “Earth” in line with comic book Multiverse’s such as those featured in Marvel or DC. The choices the players make for their Earth sees their version of the shared character gain different skills, abilities and histories.

The key aspect I’ve been trying to keep in designing Verge and its multiverse is not to design it as such. Being a Multiverse-based Superhero game, much of Verge’s inspiration comes from the obvious Superhero comic books such as Crisis on Infinite Earths or Secret Wars. On a more subtle level, Verge also draws heavily on comic books that feature the Multiverse and alternate reality themes as a more run-of-the-mill standard feature of the setting. This list includes offerings such as Wildstorm’s The Authority and Planetary. These comics, both set within the same universe, feature the Multiverse as regularity of existence and through this trope offer a wide variety of allegorical characters. The phrase and concept itself, allegorical character, refers to the use of existing, licenced, media and franchise entities that have grown through history, the Superhero genre and marketplace importance to have resonance as figures of modern day mythology. The Authority’s Apollo and Midnighter, for instance, are quite noted allegories of Superman and Batman. In this fashion, these comics engage both the Multiverse and allegorical characters to have Batman, Superman, Spider-Man, the X-Men and countless iconic Superheroes without actually impacting on licencing. The idea is that simply these characters exist throughout the Multiverse in a variety of different forms across a variety of distinct Superhero settings. It’s that idea – that there are countless, distinct Superhero worlds or settings out there, but only a handful of characters that are truly meaningful to audiences – that is at the heart of Verge’s design. The idea that every Superhero that ever lived, even for a moment, in the pages of a comic or the imagination of a fan does exist somewhere, in some form, out there…

The emphasis within Verge is not on building a detailed map of the Multiverse that forms its setting, but rather engaging the promise of possibility – showing players the possibilities of what can be out there without producing an exhaustive and limiting list of what is. In terms of background and rules, a middle ground approach is adopted with the core book itself detailing several sample or example Earths and providing a long list of modular features and aspects of individual Earths that may be blended together to create a unique reality.

Naturally this broad scope gave Verge a staggering scope to comprehend and a setting that, on initial conception, felt somewhat unwieldy to approach. Yet, the chaos, inconsistency and confusion are not simply part of the setting in Verge, but its lump sum. Thus the atmosphere of Verge is one of extreme genre-conflict and wild what-ifs. What if Jeremy Kent, the little boy from England who found out he was destined to become the greatest Wizard of all time, was deemed a threat by the Executioner – the hard-hitting vigilante leading a one-man war on crime. Suddenly, high fantasy adventure is battling it out with gritty street vigilantism. The strangeness of the moment in which a Griffin comes swooping out of the night sky – rushing through a crowded London street and a hail of gangster’s gun fire to snatch up its prey - should be embraced. In this sense, Verge games blend genre-busting blends of distinct atmospheres - a gritty 1980s-esq world with a campy, after-school cartoon reality – along with things that defy clear classification. An Earth with the technology of a Diesel Punk setting in cities that look like 1980s dystopia, ruled by an overbearing Theocracy facing rampant problems from demons and magic could be best described as Weird Punk Deco, for instance. The
The common theme that runs through all Earths in the Multiverse, however, is Superheroes. The vast majority of all realities are protected by Superheroes, each one of countless Iterations and variations of the same, Archetypical, beings replicated throughout the Multiverse. And in this sense, Superheroes can be considered the one consistent thread that links all Earths in Verge’s Multiverse, no matter how extreme their variations and thus one of the two pillars of the setting.

The other pillar of Verge’s setting is Lovecraftian Horror. Role-play games generally feature stock antagonists, designed as a clear and automatic enemy for the player characters. The iconic marauding band of Orcs and Goblins in Dungeons and Dragons, for instance, Or the Sabbat, those Vampires who decline to hide and live secret lives, for Vampire: The Masquerade. In a setting with limitless possibilities of character, the possibilities of antagonist were likewise broad and, moreover, required to be of suitably threatening challenge not one, but a veritable army of Superheroes. Lovecraftian Horror, placed on the multi-reality scale, provides a suitably large and looming threat, for the player characters of Verge.

Lovecraftian Horror is a style or subgenre of horror that emphasizes cosmic terror in the form of, alternatingly, the unknown and the unknowable. Attributed to 1920s United States author H.P. Lovecraft and his distinctive writing style and tropes, Lovecraftian horror deemphasizes gore and shock for notions of lurching, lingering dread and looming treats. Because of this, Lovecraftian Horror often errs towards the fantastic and the uncanny aspects of the horror genre than say Gothic, Slasher, or Undead. And I have often found that the atmospheric aspects of Lovecraftian Horror tend to make for a more distinct blend of themes and challenges when engaged in Superheroic settings than other forms of the genre. The Marvel comic book Blade, for instance, engages themes of Vampirism akin to Dracula, with the protagonist Blade making his way through the world as a cursed, half-human, half-vampire hunter of the undead. But while Blade draws heavily on Gothic Horror, Blade’s vampiric abilities and arsenal of weaponry amounts to a flashy superpower as the protagonist slashes, stakes and shoots his way through every problem and situation. Compared to the (also) Marvel series Darkhold: Pages from the Book of Sins, wherein random pages from a cursed book – in the vein of Lovecraft’s Necronomicon - are mailed to unsuspecting victims turn into a mountain of worms or be devoured by dogs (who are themselves devoured by the book), Blade’s problems are remarkably simple. Likewise, DC Comic’s Swamp Thing might present Alec Holand, aka the Swamp Thing, with a life overflowing with monsters and puppet mastered through strange otherworldly forces. But through Avatar’s and Parliaments who speak for these forces, they become personable. Compared to the abstract, unspeaking entity that is the Source in New Frontier – a biological entity that has the body somewhat describable as a giant, blazing, flying island on an unspoken mission to exterminate humanity – Swamp Thing’s Green becomes relatable.

Like most roleplay games, Verge has multiple traits representing distinct spheres of activity – such as those governing physical and mental capacities as well as social interaction and world understanding. On that level, Lovecraftian Horror provides challenges to the player characters that require more approaches than simply kicking, punching or blasting ones way through a series of combat encounters. That isn’t to say Verge lacks combat. It is a Superhero game, after all. But rather that the central problem of the setting’s stock antagonism cannot be resolved through combat exclusively. The assertion of problems and antagonism that cannot simply be punched through is particularly apt concerning the central features of Lovecraft’s own setting (collectively referred to as the Mythos) – the Great Old Ones. For Lovecraft, the Great Old Ones were a loose collection of ancient, powerful cosmic, interdimensional, magical or alien entities that, at various points in history, ruled, existed on, became imprison or simply touched earth but had since fallen into a death-like form of hibernation. Simply beyond comprehension, these entities could not be understood much less combatted through conventional means. Though it was not originally in Lovecraft’s own work, later utilizers of Lovecraft’s Mythos configured the Great Old Ones as cosmic sources of evil.

In the face of multiple sources interpretations and takes on Lovecraftian Horror, for Verge, we adopted a middle-ground approach. The Irresolute Idols, as we call our “Great Old Ones”, are entities from outside reality. And being unreal entities, the Idols have no purpose, no true form as natives of conventional reality would understand them, nor do they possess desires or needs. But being unreal things, the Irresolute Idols eat reality, absorbing it simply by touching it, and thus slowly are devouring the Multiverse. While not evil per say, the Irresolute Idols do corrupt by
proximity and thus are followed or unconsciously create monstrous and wicked things in their wake. The Irresolute Idols thus provide Verge with a threat that operates on a Multiversal, all of reality, scale. In terms of challenging player character groups, the Idols themselves are presented in terms of statistics more akin to a hurricane or earthquake than they are to a player character. And in that vein, player characters cannot simply punch, kick or blast the Irresolute Idols themselves into submission. Rather they must actively track, interrogate and confront the mixture of cults, Supervillain’s, monsters and occult artefacts spawned by the Idols which have given them a presence on any given Earth.

In addition to Superheroes, Lovecraftian Horror forms the second consistent pillar linking each individual setting in Verge. With these two features in mind, Verge offers players and Game Masters not so much a consistent, word-of-god, doctrine for its setting, but a loose thread to weave into countless and varied stories and setting. As the final stages of the core book start to come together, I’m in the stage now of looking hard at the final portions of the book – the last chapter and a long list of appendixes where a lot of the tools, templates and variant rules are dwelling. Rules for playing unique Superheroes on a individual Earth, for playing Villains, a “core Earth” stock setting in the vain of existing Superhero universes (Marvel, DC, Valiant, Wild Cards, and so forth) and countless other bits and pieces. On one hand, I look at these rules and understand that they are not part of the core game unless a particular Game Master wants them to be. On the other hand, they are part of the broader patchwork of possibilities that Verge implies.

(Graphic from Crisis of Infinite Earths, a key influence on Verge)
Captain Carrot: A Marvel SH Character
by Belinda Lee

Captain Carrot is a mutant angel, a cupid-like figure complete with bow-and-arrow. Being an otherworldly being, Captain Carrot has the capacity to travel between dimensions and as a creature of light, the Captain is protected from attacks from the shadow, and so forth.

However Captain Carrot also takes the appearance of a slightly humanoid rabbit. A favoured strategy is to appeal to the better side of others by making use of their Cuteness Control, as a cute little bunny, which can melt the heart of the most hardened villains.

Also of note is Captain Carrot's unexpected high Strength. Who knew that such a little bunny could pack such a kick?

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<td>Bow and Arrow Creation (EX 20)</td>
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<td>Dimenion Travel (AM 50)</td>
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Talents: Carousing, Martial Arts, Tap Dancing

52 RPG REVIEW ISSUE 30 March 2016
Dr. Demonic Demonic Destroyer

by Colin Clark

A 250 point superhero character built for a game with no power frameworks or disadvantages. Notable for capacity to grapple with wings and cause enormous damage with the great strength. Despite the low SPD and DEX, an surprisingly powerful character capable and has been proving of taking out many other characters of a similar point scale, having won a Champions “pit bash” against several other equal point value characters at the Murdoch Alternative Reality Society in the middle of 1991.

Characteristics

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Powers

+10 levels with Grab, Punch, and Missile Reflection

Martial Grab, +10 STR -1 OCV, -1 DCV

Swimming -2''

Armoured Demon Body (OIF -1/2, Bulky -1/2)

- Density Increase +400 kgs, +10 STR, -2'' KB, +2 PD, +2 ED, 0 END (+1/2), Persistant (+1/2) 10 points
- Growth (15 points), Size 2x1 hex, x8 weight, +15 STR, +3 BOD, STUN, -2 DCV, +2 Perception vs, +1'' Reach, -3 KB'', 0 END (+1/2), Persistant (+1/2) 15 points
- Armour 17 rPD, 17rED 25 points
- Armour 6rPD, 6rED, hardened (+1/4) 11 points
- Flight 11'', x4 END (-2), Foulable (-1/4) 5 points
- Mental Defense (33 total), Ablative (-1) 10 points
- Power Defense (19 points), Ablative (-1) 6 points
- Life Support Self-Contained Breathing, 1 Charge (-1), Lasts One Minute (-2) 3 points
- Flash Defense (Sight), Ablative (-1) 3 points
- Extra Limbs 2 points
- Missile Reflection vs All Actions, -14, -Activation (-1/2) 16 points
- Lack of Weakness (5pts) 2 points

Base OCV 2, +10 levels to punch, missile reflection, grap Final OCV 12
Base DCV 2, -2 Growth, 1/2 DCV, Bulky Focus, Final DCV 0
Dex 7, Spd 3, ECV 3, Phases 4, 8, 12
PD/rPD 38/23 ED/rED 25/23 END 56 STUN 59 BODY 23

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Freedom Force CPRG Reviews

by Andrew Pam

I've been invited to write for RPG Review on the topic of strategic and roleplaying computer games, especially CRPGs. I have played tabletop RPGs since the early 1980s, including DMing 1st and 2nd edition AD&D and the original Traveller, but in recent years due to time restrictions I have switched to playing mostly CRPGs instead. I have a significant collection of PC RPGs from the 1980s to today, and continue to contribute to the crowdfunding of new CRPGs. I plan to review both older games (particularly where they suit the theme of an issue) and forthcoming games.

I'll start by briefly responding to last issue's article, Why Aren't Computer Games (Especially MMOs) As Much Fun To Play As Old-time D&D? by Lewis Pulsipher. I agree that games that focus on “grinding” or “levelling” without other redeeming elements are not particularly interesting, and therefore I generally won't be discussing MMOs and will be focussing on games that have an interesting story, or perhaps appealing characters or enjoyable gameplay. Even games with a linear story can be worthwhile, not just “open world” games with a story heavily influenced or even entirely constructed by the player's actions.

In keeping with this issue's superhero theme, in this article I am reviewing Freedom Force (2002) and the sequel Freedom Force vs the Third Reich (2005).

These games are real-time tactical RPGs set in a comic book universe developed by Irrational Games, featuring original characters created by Robb Waters who also worked on classic computer games Thief: The Dark Project and System Shock. The original game is inspired by the “Silver Age” of comics (1950s to 1970s) and the sequel by the “Golden Age” (1930s to 1950s) with a WWII setting thanks to a time travel plot. The campaign characters parallel well-known Marvel and DC characters, but the game also permits you to design your own characters and there is a mod community called “Mod Force”.

The Irrational Games development team was based in Boston MA and Canberra, Australia until the Canberra office (renamed to 2K Australia in 2007) was closed in April 2015. The Freedom Force games were well received by both critics and players, with the first game winning two Game Developers Association of Australia awards in 2002 (Best Game Design and Best PC Game) as well as Best RPG of E3 from Gamespy in 2003. After Freedom Force they became even better known for their very successful Bioshock series.

The games are 3D overhead view with fully destructible environments – and you are penalised for collateral damage! The combat system was reportedly inspired by the legendary CRPG Baldur's Gate. The first game features nine core superheroes: Minuteman, Mentor, El Diablo, Manbot, Alche-miss, The Ant, Liberty Lad, Microwave and Eve; and a further seven you can optionally recruit: Man O'War, Sea Urchin, Blackbird, the inseparable duo of Law and
Order, Bullet, Iron Ox and Supercollider. The second game adds seven more: The Bard, Black Jack, Green Genie, Quetzalcoatl, Sky King, Tombstone and Tricolour. Each hero comes with an origin story that is played when they first join your team. You can take up to a maximum of four of the characters in your team on each mission.

Each character has a basic body type selected from Flesh, Metal, Stone, Rubber, Fire, Energy, Wood or Frozen with differing resistances to the attack types: Piercing, Crushing, Heat, Cold, Mental, Electrical, Radiation, Energy, Acid and Mystical. Destructible objects in the game can be made from the same materials plus Air, Concrete and Cloth.

Characters also have five stats: Strength, Speed, Agility, Endurance and Energy (the rate at which their heroic abilities recharge). Finally they have special attributes and powers, not all of which will be unlocked when they start off at the beginning of the game. Attributes can be positive or negative allowing you to balance some disadvantages with additional benefits elsewhere.

The powers fall into eight categories: Melee attacks, Projectile attacks, Beam attacks (which cannot be dodged by the target), Area effects, Direct effects that immediately influence the target, Active defences, Passive defences, and Special powers that are custom-coded. When designing your own characters, all except the Special powers can be extensively customised with a range of properties such as the damage type and magnitude, the energy cost, range, accuracy and additional limitations or secondary effects. You can also select how long a power takes to go into effect with more immediate effects increasing the cost of the power.

Some Melee attacks have no energy cost (recommended to ensure your character can still attack when out of energy!) and some have a cone of effect beyond the initial impact. When using their superpowers, characters can choose to slightly or significantly overpower them or conversely to underpower them in order to use more or less energy than normal in exchange for a greater or lesser than normal effect.

Active and Passive defences that are effective against particular attack types can result in the attack being absorbed (the character gains energy!), blocked, deflected in a random direction, redirected back at a randomly chosen enemy or simply reflected back at the attacker. Some attacks can cause status effects: Enraged (the target goes beserk), temporarily Exiled from reality (unable to perform actions or take damage), Frozen (the ice can be damaged to free them), Hypnotised (they will swap sides), Mental Blank, Panicked (they will run away), Stasis (can be broken by damage), Stunned or Surrendered (they can be then interrogated by your heroes).

There are also secondary status effects: Acid Burnt and Irradiated (progressive damage until the effect wears off), Altered damage resistances, Blinded, Density Altered (slows them down and forces flyers to land), Image Displaced (cannot take damage but broken by attacking), Empathy (attackers share whatever damage they do to this target), Energised (energy recharge rate is increased, but may lead to dangerous instability), Hexed (moves slower and likely to stun themselves when attacking) or Nullified (a random superpower is temporarily disabled).

Characters can be knocked back and take collision damage...
proportional to their velocity when striking something solid, and can also take falling damage if they hit the ground. When hit points reach zero, characters are knocked out rather than dying. If your heroes are low on energy or hit points or otherwise in trouble, they may be able to perform a Heroic Deed (usually only once per mission) to fully restore their hit points or energy or to remove all negative status effects.

Characters taken on missions collect experience points which allow them to level up, at which time they earn character points used to enhance that character by upgrading their base stats or unlocking more super abilities. The team as a whole also collects “prestige points” which influence the public's perception of your team and are also used to purchase additional characters for your team. The more powerful the character, the more prestige points they cost. The same applies when designing your own character, so body types with more advantages and less disadvantages will increase the prestige cost, as will higher stats and greater abilities. If you design an overpowered character, they might not be affordable in the game!

During combat, characters with sufficient strength can pick up objects and wield them as weapons or throw them as missiles – for example lamp posts, vehicles or massive boulders! If they have sufficient speed, characters can run. If they have the appropriate abilities, they may also be able to leap tall buildings, fly, or teleport. Characters who can neither jump, fly nor teleport will not be able to collect bonuses on top of buildings so it's advisable to have at least one hero with one of those abilities on every mission.

Each game is structured as a series of “comic book issues” that tells a linear story. In addition to the primary objective of each mission and the overall goal of increasing prestige and avoiding collateral damage, missions have optional secondary objectives that provide the opportunity to earn more experience and prestige. There are more than twenty missions in each game, though some missions are broken into two or three acts.

The entire manual is printed in the notorious Comic Sans font, probably the only situation where that is actually thematically appropriate! The Freedom Force games use the programming language Python for all game scripting, which was an excellent choice as it continues to be a widely used and popular language and is both powerful and easy to learn.

The games have been available on Steam since 2009 and you can currently pick up both games as the Freedom Force: Freedom Pack for US$8 or you can get them individually on GOG.com for under AU$8 each. The story of the first game has also been published as a six-issue comic book miniseries from Image Comics. I bought both games and played them through to the end, and enjoyed both the style and the stories. Recommended. I hope this article encourages you to take a closer look!
Movie Review: Batman v Superman Dawn of Justice

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Zack Snyder
2016

It’s… it’s not good.

That’s not to say it’s completely terrible, but, it’s not a good movie.

I could go so far as to say that it’s a bad movie with some good bits in it.

I had hoped that the scathing reviews were just a bit of superhero movie burnout, or the punishment of high expectations, but it turns out that everything one could fear about a flick directed by Snyder with a script that David S. Goyer had a hand in easily came to pass.

The list of stuff the flick gets “wrong” about Batman and Superman is far longer than what it gets right. I put wrong in quotes because I’m not going to pretend like my opinion is definitive or expert or anything. No one likes listening to a Comic Book Guy spouting nonsense like they themselves invented Batman back in the late 1930s.

I do have an opinion, though, and it’s as valid as any other persons, with the possible exception of Professor Stephen Hawking or Sir David Attenborough, or Ginger Spice, because my opinion is pure shit compared to what those titans of thought could come up with.

I’ve read a fair bit of Batman comics, even as far back as the first ones in the 40s. I’ve seen a few Batman films. Watched lots of the cartoons, and even the glorious Adam West high camp series. I’ve read a few books about Batman. I feel like I have a bit of an idea of what the character is like. I’ve seen him at his grimmest, and at his goofiest, and everything in between.

The one thing I can definitively say about the character is that he can range from being portrayed as a violent psychopath who barely keeps his grip on sanity while taking out his childhood trauma on the crims of Gotham (constantly fighting the urge to kill some of them) to a more understanding, caring chap who’s still deeply traumatised but who tries to do his best for the innocents of the city and generally succeeds. And yes, always, always, that childhood trauma of violently losing his parents underpins everything.

What doesn’t work and what can never work with Batman is that he ever be portrayed as a murderous vigilante who kills. A Batman who kills isn’t Batman – he’s the Punisher or any other number of jerks who kill. That ain’t the Bat. He’s obsessed with crime and justice – the second he starts killing, well, might as well hang that cape up, because that ain’t justice.

Even as I’m mindful that some of the very first The Bat Man stories did have the character killing crims, and did have him using guns, and while I understand that having a hero character never kill was a necessity after the Hays Code was introduced in the States, it’s deeply informed the character for seventy years, so I think it’s safe to say it’s a feature, not
a bug.

I’m not sure that Zack Snyder gets that. I know people have said to him, especially in relation to his first foray with Superman in Man of Steel, that these iconic heroes can’t really be killers and be true to what makes them distinctive and archetypal, but I don’t think he really acknowledges the argument. When someone recently put the question to him, he mumbled something like “Why do I keep getting shit for all those deaths at the end of Man of Steel? Didn’t you see the last Star Wars film? How many people did they kill there? Billions? Trillions?” Apart from being an astoundingly wrongheaded argument, he does grasp that it was the baddies doing that, not the heroes, right? Right? I have to ask, because even when things are bleeding obvious, sometimes they turn out not to be.

Other than the end of Man of Steel having a Superman who does kill someone, there were also swathes of destruction that Supes seemed blithely unconcerned with (as exemplified by that ‘hot’ first kiss he shares with Lois Lane standing in the dust of thousands of former living people who’ve been dead for like minutes). This didn’t ring true with a lot of people, but at the time it didn’t really bug me that much. I had to accept that while we’ve all got a version of Superman in our heads, that doesn’t mean each new time out of the gate that it has to conform to that. Also, I figured, this, being a version of Superman, is one which is still trying to figure out his morality, his motivations and such.

All that destruction at the end of the flick that rankled viewers, it seemed like Snyder took that criticism on board, because it’s incorporated into the beginning of this flick. Bruce Wayne (Ben Affleck) is in Metropolis at the time that Superman and Zod are having their showdown, and he sees the destruction firsthand, and sees one of his own Wayne Enterprises skyscrapers come down with lots of his employees dying horribly inside. It’s enough to piss a guy off, even when he’s being an audience surrogate.

Inexplicably, to the viewer perhaps, Metropolis honours Supes for destroying half the city with massive statues and parades and probably a non-stop flow of hookers and such, but Wayne nurses a serious grudge against the alien. In Supes Wayne sees the potential destruction of the entire planet, because he does not see there being any limits on his actions. With no limitations, with no reason to always be good, inevitably, Supes will go bad.

Maybe the grudge seems logical to you. I wouldn’t argue that it’s unreasonable. If they jokingly or seriously refer to Supes as a god, then, well, it’s understandable that many may fear him. Because, hell, I might not believe in God, but I definitely fear Them in all Their many armed and many eyed glory, just in case.

It is an interesting notion, one that’s been wrestled with in the comics for decades. At various times Supes is portrayed as the strongest being in the galaxy, and so there are times when he himself wonders about why he should have to listen to the mewlings of all these weak human meatbags. And all those bloody cats in trees that keep needing to be rescued: jeez, can’t someone else do it? Generally, if not always, the fundamental decency of Supes’s character is attributed not to his alien nature as a son of Krypton, but to the upbringing he had at the hands of Ma and Pa Kent here on Earth in Smallville, USA. Truth, justice and the American Way.

This Superman? Well, his dad (Kevin Costner, worst superhero’s dad ever) in the last flick told him it would have been better had Supes let a busload of children die rather than reveal his powers to the world, so, make of that what you will.

All this Superman seems to care about is Lois Lane (Amy Adams). He can hear her wherever she is in the world, whenever she’s in trouble, he can be there instantly to save her, who cares whatever else may happen. Does this Superman struggle with his place in this world? It doesn’t really seem like it bothers him that much, any more than he struggles with “Am I too handsome for this world?”

That chin is amazing. Anyway, as a journalist, Supes starts hearing about some of the out-of-the-blue psychopathic stuff Batman has been doing in Gotham, like, branding criminals with his symbol, for some reason, which leads to the crims being murdered when they’re put in general population in jail.

Well boo bloody hoo. Jerks in jail can have all sorts of nazi tattoos, and no-one bats an eyelid. Brand one scumbag and they treat you like you’re the one who killed him with a sharpened toothbrush.

Anyway, it’s meant to imply that both Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent, and their alter egos have serious beef with each other. It is stuff that could be cleared up with a few minutes of conversation, but then that wouldn’t result in an almighty dustup where Batman and Superman throw down in the most brutal fashion they can muster. We have to be
convinced that Batman absolutely is convinced that he must kill Superman for the good of humanity, and Superman has to have good reason to want to kill Batman too.

Hence the machinations of the villain of the piece, Alex Luthor (let’s just say it’s Zuckerberg), who is a tittering, hyper-manic chap whose motivations for anything are at the very least murky, other than the bizarre out of nowhere statement about daddy doing terrible things to him when he was a little boy.

Holy shit. What the fuck were the writers thinking as they came up with that? I need to kill Superman because I was molested as a child, and I’m going to create some Kryptonian abomination I can’t control to kill everyone in the world as well just because?

Well, I guess they are given ample motivation by the script, but, good goddamn does the entire film deflate even before that point. I can’t really talk about the next bit without it being spoilerly, but as the Bat and the blue Boy Scout battle it out, the Bat comes within inches of killing Supes. Like, he’s right there. He’s incredibly angry at him, as in, hates him so much he’s about to kill him. About to kill Superman.

Something interrupts him, and I won’t say what, but within the span of another few moments, Batman is elsewhere, saving a dear old lady, saying to her “I’m a friend of your son’s”.

Um, no, Batman, mere seconds ago you were going to kill her adoptive son like really dead. Like, you were totally trying to completely murderise him. When exactly did you and he bond and form what you could even loosely term a friendship?

That’s not even the worst moment in this highly uneven flick, but it’s one of many that stood out so proudly and inanely, like the proud dog’s balls of a particularly dumb dog. My next favourite lowlight is all about Amy Adam’s Lois Lane character, and the shit she does with a goddamn spear. You heard right, a goddamn spear, one that Bats was going to use to kill her precious boyfriend. Stuff happens, stuff happens, and we are shown Lois dithering about what to do with the spear. Should I stash it over here? What about over here? Maybe in the first place that I originally thought of?

More time passes, where a lot of carnage unfolds, new heroes come into it, a new enemy is revealed (which is just terrible, I have to say. It looked like a slightly angrier cave troll from Lord of the Rings, and was about as scary), and then it cuts back to Lois, having decided where to stash the spear, for no earthly reason, deciding she has to go back to get the spear, even though there’s no way she knows what’s been going on outside of the, I dunno, bathhouse? Swimming pool? where Bats had intended to kill her boyfriend. She goes to get the spear again, and runs into trouble.

It was structured and pulled off so awkwardly that I cringed as I was watching it, and I felt bad for Adams, as she’s a wonderful actor, and she’s been nominated multiple times for Oscars. Then I remember how much money she probably made for being in this, and then I don’t feel so bad for her.

There are all these machinations of Luthor’s in the background that apparently govern the entirety of the story, but, from what I remember from the comics and the cartoons, Luthor wasn’t generally depicted as a complete knuckleheaded dundie like he is here. His manipulations of certain government officials and even senators (Holly Hunter, why are you in this flick?) aren’t really believable beyond the extent that the plot requires them to be furthered along.

But there’s no real reason for them. The central conflict between Batman and Superman starts off because both of them have, at least in their own minds, legitimate gripes against the other, and they have to do with the idea of justice and how it is meted out that both of them hold. Having Luthor manipulate them into fighting to the death just lets whatever ideas they might have had completely fall by the wayside, and them say the equivalent of “now we are allies, because how else is a Justice League movie going to come along?” because it’s convenient, not because the story has justified it in any way.

I’m not the first and I won’t be the last to say that this flick exists only to set up future movies. Why DC feels an obligation to go the way of Marvel, in this bandwagonesque attempt to set up a franchise, is a mystery to me. Other than an egotistical “Well, we’re JUST as important as they are!” poorly thought out business strategy, it doesn’t make
sense to me. You have to actually have characters people want to watch team up with other characters they might enjoy (and recognize, more importantly) for it to work. Marvel went to the trouble of establishing their individual characters before they mashed them together in *The Avengers*.

Who really thinks audiences are going to flock to the cinemas to watch an Aquaman movie? Really? What about a Flash or Cyborg movie, both of which are kinda teased here? No, the only thinking is “a me-too copy of the *Avengers* will make as much money as the *Avengers*, fer sure”.

Don't they remember what happened with *The Green Lantern*? That flick was total donkey vomit, and no-one's going to want to see that character again, with or without a team of superfriends sweetening the deal.

The only character that actually gets any characterization set-up here is Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot looks to be a good approach for the character, and I genuinely hope her film goes gangbusters, because I love the character), but this flick was meant to be something different other than an advertisement for *Avengers DC-style*.

Affleck is, surprisingly, all right for this version of the Batman. It’s meant to be an older, more cynical, more Big Picture Batman who isn’t thinking about bagsnatchers and mob bosses and killer clowns: he’s thinking about global threats to humanity. And, apparently, he’s been let down by other heroes too many times before, so he’s jaded and paranoid enough to contemplate killing the best of the best (just to stay on top). The problem isn’t really with him or how he’s characterised or acted.

The less said about Supes the better. The flick doesn’t really make him seem like anything more than a hologram, a hollow symbol of a hollow property that they aren’t really sure how to humanise. Just loving Lois to the detriment of humanity doesn’t do the trick.

All I hope is that they do right by Diana Prince in the next flick to come out. But I shouldn’t have to be thinking about future films while watching current films, should I?

The terribleness that sneaks into this flick, I’m fairly confident, can be mostly attributed to Snyder. The best exemplification of this is the terrible nightmare sequence Bruce has, which is meant to give him even more motivation to kill Supes. I had seen it before, months before watching the film, because it was used as a kind of teaser trailer for the flick. In it, in a post-apocalyptic looking scenario, gunmen kneel before Superman as he approaches a chained Batman and tears off the cowl. I realised only when watching it in this flick what felt so off about it. And then I realised – the whole inexplicable set up, with other literal bat men lingering around, and people wearing Superman’s logo like fascist symbols, all of this was exactly like one of the terrible sequences in Snyder’s earlier monstrosity of a flick called, you guessed it, *Sucker Punch*.

Plus, the scene ends up meaning nothing, except for an even more bizarre tease for future adventures where the Flash’s head immediately after the dream sequence pops out of nowhere warning Bruce that Lois Lane has to be kept alive at all costs. What the hell? Why not make a decent flick first before teasing the next one?

Jeez, this really wasn’t that good, was it? And it very nearly ends with Zuckerberg-Eisenberg in a prison cell, saying “Ting ting ting” repeatedly. Ting ting ting? Ting ting ting. The bell cannot be unruled, apparently.

Ting ting ting indeed.

5 times I wish Wonder Woman had killed both of them out of 10.
Movie Review: X-Men Apocalypse

by Andrew Moshos

dir: Bryan Singer, 2016

It’s really not as bad as they’re saying.

I’ve even heard that most graven of insults: “It’s as bad as Batman versus Superman: Dawn of Justice”, which is the new benchmark for a superhero flick sucking more powerfully than a locomotive, and more grimly than a stubble-covered arse cheek.

It’s nowhere near as bad as all that, in fact it’s probably on a par with most of the X-Men flicks, and is definitely better, at the very least, than III: The Last Stand.

The director, Bryan Singer, hopes you’ll be reminded of how bad that one was when you’re watching this. In case you didn’t already know how much he hated the fact that Fox Studios let Brett Ratner direct it, he made a flick (being the last one, Days of Future Past) with the express intention of annulling, undoing, revising and expunging everything that happened in The Last Stand.

And I’m not exactly complaining. I’m not exactly caring, either, but that’s beside the point. I’m not really invested in these X-Men flicks, because, honestly, caring about movies based on comic-book properties is not a strategy that pays off.

Comparing it with the fiasco that was the terrible B v S isn’t a fruitful path to take, and it just causes me pain, anyway, having to remember the sheer depth and breadth of its awfulness.

It’s best to compare it to the other X-Men flicks, and maybe Cap America: Civil War, since they’re all Marvel properties; it’s just that Fox has the film rights to the X-Men characters, and will never, ever let them out of their cold, dead, hands.

Civil War, despite being ‘serious’, and having War in its title, was actually a fleet and fun movie. I know, it seems incongruous, but that’s how it worked. Deadpool, released a couple of months ago, was awfully violent and hellishly funny, and connected with audiences (I hope it was because of the fart jokes).

X-Men: Apocalypse is neither funny nor (rarely) fun. The tone is quiet serious, and the villain is humourless and implacable, kind of like a blue smurf crossed with a Terminator cyborg. He also, it doesn’t help, looks kinda goofy. I respect that they didn’t want to go all CGI with him, and have a real guy under the makeup and armour, but as a guy standing around, he looks kinda like something from Doctor Who, which nothing in any film should ever look like.

Sometimes the villains from comics don’t transition at all well to screen, no matter the advances in nerd technologies.
He also has a pretty lame motivation, in that he wants to rule the world but he also wants to kill everyone in it. It’s a motivation that never makes any sense to me, whether it’s an ancient Egyptian god, or an AI, some dark elf or some penguin who’s gotten a bit uppity.

But this dude, Apocalypse (Oscar Isaac), has awakened to the modern world, after millennia of sleep, and does not like what he sees. So he vows to wipe the slate clean and start again.

Most relevant for the X-Men is that this guy is thought to be the first mutant. Now, I don’t know how that works, since the mutants in this property are generally referred to as The Children of the Atom, as in, they came about as a result of the dawning of the Nuclear Age (in our actual Earth history). But that’s by the by. He’s a character, and he exists, and he’s like the Biggest Bad of those comics I think (?)

This one continues on from the other two flicks that were set in the 60s and 70s, but doesn’t do ‘that’ thing of tying itself to historical events like the Cuban Missile Crisis or the Vietnam War as a form of telling a sly secret history. As far as I can tell, in that I don’t recall a time when a blue Egyptian god arose and killed everyone in Cairo and sent every nuclear weapon into space.

Reagan is president, but he doesn’t get to call Apocalypse’s rise an Evil Empire, nor does he get to politely ask Apocalypse to ‘tear down this pyramid’. The anxiety of nuclear war is around, but there aren’t that many markers of the era that are overly familiar. Sweet Dreams by The Eurythmics plays a key part, and floppy floopy hairstyles abound but other than that, I prefer this flick’s rendering of history rather than our own.

The mutants of the world aren’t really divided into separate camps (as in pro-human or anti-human, nor do the humans seem particularly anti-mutant either). All except against Magneto, sorry, Erik Lehnsherr (Michael Fassbender), who everyone hates because he tried to kill Richard Nixon in the last film.

Really? That doesn’t sound right. All the same, he’s been living the quiet life in Poland, with a wife and a darling daughter, meekly working in a factory, not using his powers, punching a clock, probably drinking a lot of vodka and eating very starchy foods, sighing a contented sigh when he finally gets to sit on the couch every night. Tired but happy, I think is the look they’re going for.

The rise of Apocalypse, though, means all sorts of seemingly unconnected events, unfortunate events at that, occur at around the same time. A worldwide tremor almost causes a fatal accident at Erik’s work, he saves a guy’s life, but this act of kindness, one we wouldn’t expect from Magneto, damns him and nearly the world.

See, Apocalypse has a modus operandi – a way of doing stuff every time he’s resurrected. He selects four mutants to be his Horsemen, and he steals powers from them, or gives them more powers, or something like that. Why he needs these hangers on as an entourage, well, maybe he gets lonely and likes having people to talk to, who get where he’s coming from. Maybe he’s not comfortable as a solo act, and needs a band around him. He certainly doesn’t really need anyone else, because he can kill people easier that swatting a fly. Swatting a fly would take some energy, some movement, but he seems to be able to turn people to sand without having to really even think about it.

He selects Storm, Angel, Magneto and Psylocke to be his bringers of doom. Psylocke, apart from being a terrible name, has the single worst costume I think I’ve ever seen in anything, really. I don’t doubt it’s from the comics, but having someone wear a one-piece bikini with some tassels and ribbons to the end of the world might make some sweaty nerds uncomfortable in their areas, but it’s not a way to be taken very seriously. It’s the most unnecessarily sexualised outfit in a comic flick since… well, let’s not pretend the suits the studios do it because of fidelity to the source materials. They do the same to Black Widow putting her in stuff so skin tight I’m surprised you can’t see her ovaries. As an equivalent they should at least have James McAvoy in a cock-straining g-string that would make the boys of Magic Mike envious.

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Maybe it seems like they take a long time to get there, because there’s so many people they need to check in with, so many opinions that need canvassing. Do they all matter? Possibly not. But returning favourites like Jennifer Lawrence as Mystique, who’s become a reluctant positive role model for mutant kind and… some other people need to be balanced with ‘new’ jerks like Australia’s Own Kodi Smit-McPhee as Nightcrawler and Sophie Turner as a young Jean Gray, and an ever younger Cyclops (Lucas Till), because the story needs to have someone to care about. Not that I care one bit about that one-eyed freak.

There is a reprise of the slow-motion scene at the Pentagon from the last film where Quicksilver (MAGNETO’S SON as they keep telling us every five goddamn minutes) tries to save a bunch of people at the School for the Gifted (that nonetheless couldn’t see this coming), and I think it’s another bravura scene, just maybe not as ‘funny’ as the earlier one, but no less competent.

The scene that comes out of absolutely nowhere, as in I had no idea it was coming, and surprised me the most, occurs when a certain Australian actor, masquerading as a Canadian immortal with shiny claws that come out of his hands, is first unleashed, and basically is, for the time he’s in the story, an unstoppable monster from a horror flick, getting to do the bloody carving and shredding on a bunch of humans that people have been waiting 9 films for. He was terrifying, even with strange headgear that made me wonder whether he was wearing a retainer to fix his teeth or something.

Yes it all builds to a massive fight at the end, but I’d argue that the road they take to get there is an enjoyable one, and the fight at the end isn’t a completely dumb one. I won’t argue that it’s a meaningful one, but these characters work well together, especially at the end, to beat someone I would have thought they couldn’t. More fool me. The sequence at Auschwitz, one which many have argued is in poor taste at best, and downright monstrously misguided at worst is a strong one, for me. They’ve long established Erik’s connection to the place, since his family were slaughtered there, so bringing this back full circle seems like a valid choice to me.

The relationship between Charles, Erik and Raven is a strong one, and, let’s be fair, it’s also always been about the love/jealousy that exists between the three of them, and in some ways Apocalypse gives them a decent ending on this part of it all, especially since we now have different dynamics and chemistries to look forward to.

Or not. It’s not as if there aren’t enough of these goddamn films coming out. It was entertaining enough for my money, and all the negativity about it ignores the fact that all of these X-Men flicks are a bit naff, really, let’s be honest. Whether as a metaphor for civil rights / gay rights and such, or just an excuse to watch superpowered people whack a bunch of other superpowered people, really, it’s about a bunch of freaks the world hates who have to work together to save the world.

And that gives hope to freaks, geeks, and the great unwashed undatable masses the world over, which has to be a good thing, doesn’t it?

7 times all will not be revealed any time soon out of 10

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“I tried it your way, Charles. I lived with them, as one of them. They took everything from me. Now, we shall take everything from them.” – Erik, you’re a bad man, but you’re just so compelling – X-Men: Apocalypse
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