

THE HISTORY OF SUPERHERO RPGS

In 1984 you couldn't move for them, but by 1986 you couldn't find them for love nor money. Antony Johnston gets all dewy-eyed about superhero roleplaying games.

Superhero roleplaying is great fun. At its most basic it is fantasy wish-fulfilment. You can fly, be a hero, beat up the bad guys and get the girl. It enables you to tell a ripping yarn just for the sheer hell of it, without worrying too much about realism or coincidence. Superheroes have always been popular, but superhero RPGs have come and gone.

The superhero genre is universal and easy on the referee. He or she has no complex new political systems to learn, no books of monsters and strange races to memorise. The same goes for the players – no long-winded lessons on the history of the gameworld, no searching through the rules trying to find if a fireball is any use against a Hhrogothian Vomit

Beetle. The world is ours, the governments are those around at the time, the international relationships are the current ones and even the laws of physics are (generally) the same. You simply roll your superhero and go.

The superhero is many things to many people. You can be a dark, tortured soul, agonising over the moral decay of the world, a golden boy who kisses babies and beats up bank robbers for breakfast, or even a fuzzy purple blob from Betelgeuse (don't laugh, I've seen this).

There's never a dull moment in a superhero game. The PCs are constantly at loggerheads with the official police (and a few secret MI5-like organisations to boot), trying to hold down day jobs and keep their real identities secret while being heroes. Then there are families to deal with, not to mention government legislation on superheroes and the feelings of Joe Public towards these super-beings – all this before they even think of fighting Dr Destructo and his evil World Domination Plot™.

JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON

Soon after the release of *Marvel Super Heroes* and *DC Heroes* (see 'Old Favourites' below) the bandwagon hit the road. Suddenly everyone and their aunt Edna was releasing new superhero games and re-issuing old ones. *Champions*, the first really popular superhero system, was back in a shiny new edition, *GURPS Supers*, *Guardians*, *Villains & Vigilantes* – even *TWERPS* got in on the action with *Superdudes!* None of these games could draw on the resources of Marvel and DC, which forced them to focus more on the creation of original heroes, with varying degrees of success.

OLD FAVOURITES

So what did we used to play? Well, say 'superhero' and everyone thinks of Marvel. Surprise, surprise, say 'superhero RPG' and many still think of Marvel. *Marvel Super Heroes* from TSR wasn't the first superhero game, but it was the first big-budget release, and had an established fan base to draw on. The game had easy mechanics (one type of roll on one table resolved everything you wanted to do), and gave you the chance to play your favourite comic book hero. It sold boatloads.

Never to be outdone, DC Comics then licensed Mayfair games to produce the equally cryptically-titled *DC Heroes*. This had more complex, detailed mechanics, but benefited from a better, more balanced hero creation system (Marvel's was not so good).

Both games had good, solid backing and a wealth of pre-generated material to draw on, but there was a downside. Marvel and DC wanted you to play their established heroes, as shown in their comics. To this end they provided detailed stats of their most popular characters, but their systems for generating a new, original hero of your own devising were sketchy at best. Those wanting their own heroes tended to stick with *Champions*.

There was also a game called *Golden Heroes* from Games Workshop. I won't repeat myself here – you can order a copy of *arcane 7* if you want to read my views on why *Golden Heroes* was top of the heap (see page 48 for back issue details). Suffice to say that it was British (with an ironic atmosphere), it was a clean system and it worked.


By 1985 the market was swamped and everyone was playing superheroes. Times were good. 'Okay,' you say, 'if they were so good, how come nobody plays them now?' Would you believe it's all the fault of an English guy who looks like Jesus?


In 1985 Alan Moore wrote *Watchmen*. A year later Frank Miller wrote *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, rewriting the caped crusader's history and bringing him up to date. The ball started rolling and was picked up by people such as John Smith (*New Statesman*), Grant Morrison (*Zenith*) and Pat Mills (*Marshal Law*). A new era of superhero comics was ushered in.

Now your aunt Edna was writing alternative superhero comics involving

outcasts from society, their lives wrecked by adventuring – idealistic fools unable to cope with the Real World, taken advantage of by governments and the media. This new wave of superhero comics examined the motivations of a superhero – why would someone want to give up all their free time to fight crime and evil? Why not just use your powers to your own personal ends? Imagine how difficult it would be for a superhero to live in our world. The media attention, the ridicule. 'I was Captain Ectoplasm's love child!' Or, 'This week on Geraldo – superheroes. Social conscience, or a bad role model for our children?'

Old-style superheroes and their respective games soon became perceived as juvenile and naive. People wanted gritty realism and social relevance. The climate shifted dramatically, eventually settling where

WORTH BUYING
 **Watchmen** (DC Comics, 1985) is set in an alternate 1985, where nuclear war is imminent and only one 'real' superhero exists. His powers have shaped the world, but as Armageddon approaches, he disappears.

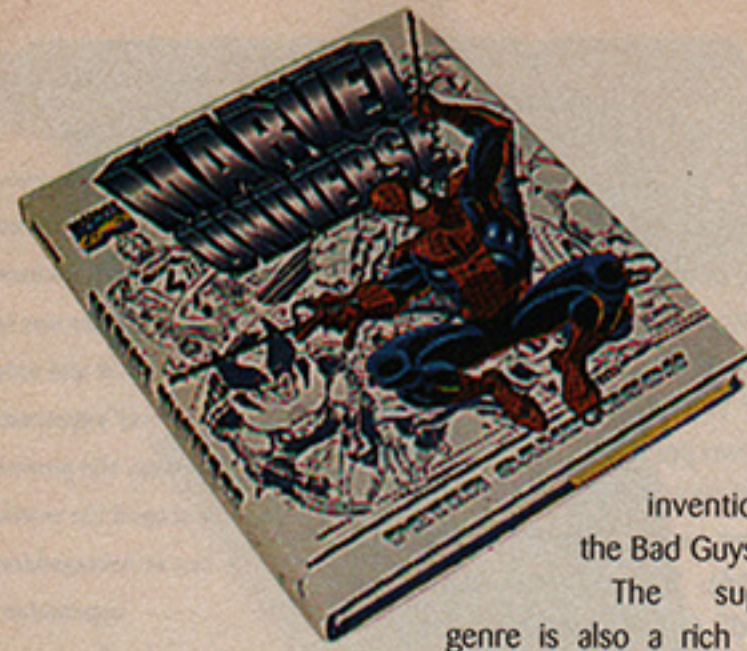
MONEY WELL SPENT
 Highly recommended is *How to be a Superhero* by Mark Leigh and Mike Lepine (Penguin, 1990) – probably the funniest book in the universe.



RESILIENT POWERS

A superhero campaign is a springboard for other genres. It can leap (in a single bound) from horror to sci-fi and back again. Campaigns can even switch between genres, because the setting is determined by whatever the players are up against, and superheroes exist outside the normal framework of society. No matter what universe you're playing in, a superhero's powers are still, well, super. You could play a detective trail one game, then a horror theme, a political intrigue plot and even a fantasy game thanks to the wonders of time travel, interdimensional rifts and other nutty

Illustration: Carcane by Steve Kyle



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MORE WAYS TO SPEND MONEY
For more inspiration, the *X-Men* is the best example of a long-running team of disparate heroes, and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* is required reading for anyone wanting a darker tone.

inventions of the Bad Guys. The superhero genre is also a rich one for 'pure' roleplaying (whatever that might be). Most heroes have ridiculously complex backgrounds and webs of enemies, friends and colleagues to cause them problems. The potential for psychoanalysis and inner conflict is vast, not to mention tragedy as your hero becomes torn between attending his mother's funeral or flying to Japan to defeat Emperor Sushu.

You may have already noticed my rather tongue-in-cheek attitude – you don't have to take it seriously to enjoy it (although you can if you like). Yes, dressing up in funny costumes and posturing on rooftops is silly. Yes, there may be deep-rooted psychological reasons for wanting to beat up wrongdoers and hide behind a mask. But if you don't want to analyse those issues, you don't have to. It's a game, after all – but which system should you buy?

WHAT SHOULD YOU BE PLAYING?

Unfortunately, *Marvel Super Heroes*, *DC Heroes* and *Golden Heroes* are all out of print. The only 'pure' superhero system still in publication is *Champions* for the *Hero* system.

If you've never played the *Hero* system before, it's a mite complex, and not recommended for beginners. If you have played it before, you've probably already got *Champions*. Personally, I don't like it – the old phrase 'buckets of dice' comes to mind – but if you want a pure superhero game it's the only one available at the moment. However, now that *Hero* has joined forces with R Talsorian and created the Fuzion system, a re-release of *Champions* with this new system is on the way. This can only be A Good Thing.

So what else can you do? Well, there's *GURPS*. The *Supers* sourcebook isn't difficult to find, but the system is, in my opinion, a little too realistic to lend itself well to superhero games. *Dream Park* from R Talsorian has a system for creating superheroes, but it isn't designed to be run as a superhero-only game. You could do it with a bit of work, but it's not ideal. Or there's the *D6* system from West End Games. This has a small section on superheroes which, frankly, you could write yourself if you're familiar with its *Star Wars* system. Perhaps the best bet is *Feng Shui* from Daedalus, which is already geared towards the superhero style of play, and would be easy to adapt, especially if you have a copy *Nexus*, which is compatible with the system. Oh, and let's not forget *TWERPS Superdudes*. Strictly for laughs, but the

bad names alone are worth the asking price.

As you can see, this is not an ideal situation. You could of course design your own system, but you'd need a fairly trustworthy group, not to mention referee, to ensure game balance. The temptation to powergame when faced with an infinite variety of superpowers would just be too much for some people. So let's just assume that you have bought/borrowed/created a superhero game from somewhere. How do you run a campaign?

RUNNING ADVENTURES

What sort of adventures should you run? How long is a piece of kryptonite? As mentioned above, you really can put superheroes up against anything and it will still fit. It's in the nature of the job to be faced with a wide variety of foes. Anyone at all who can cause a problem for the heroes and/or society is a viable villain, be they a mad scientist, power-hungry magician, invading alien race, corrupt politician, galactic policeman or time-travelling barbarian. Anyone at all.

With the villains come the powers the heroes must defeat and the situations they will find themselves in. The mad scientist could operate from a remote, unmapped Pacific island

SUPER SOAPS
Another great source of ideas for superhero campaigns are soap operas. As we discussed in our feature about soaps in *arcane 9*, the type of character interaction that goes on in these shows is perfectly suited to roleplaying games, especially superhero campaigns.

the players must find. The power-hungry magician lives in a wizard's tower guarded by supernatural denizens and magical wards. Thwarting an alien invasion might mean a trip to their homeworld or a battle onboard a mothership. Dealing with a politician will mean lots of detective work and double-bluffing. And a time-travelling barbarian might take the PCs back with him...

When setting up any kind of superhero campaign, there are a few basic guidelines to bear in mind. Unless your world is packed to brimming with superheroes, the PCs should elicit extreme reactions wherever they go. How they put themselves across and their general attitude will determine the reaction they get: anarchic, gun-toting avengers may find they receive the cold shoulder from any form of authority (although the tabloids will probably love them). On the other hand, heroes who are polite and merciful (for which read: don't batter their foes to a pulp) may be seen as untrustworthy by the public, but will probably move in political circles more easily. And, of course, anyone with the merest hint of magic or psionics will be regarded by the masses as a freak and probably a devil-worshipper.

Running the campaign can be as simple as you and your players want it to be. Certainly the easy way out is to simply throw new, unconnected problems at the heroes week after week, which can be solved with a minimal amount of thinking and a maximum amount of fighting. But it can be devilishly complex, too. You could start by focusing on the hero's personal lives – not just by having their aunt Edna kidnapped by the bad guys, but introducing love interests, problems at work and breakdowns of friendships. Then try throwing a few investigative adventures their way, in which brain must beat brawn. Give them an arch-villain who pops up every third session with another plot to enslave the world.

Probably the best way to do this is to have a thread running through the campaign, with a single person or organisation behind it. The players might not even know of the antagonist's existence at first, but over time they may begin to suspect that someone is behind a whole host of apparently unrelated events – the same M.O. at different crime scenes, or a calling card left behind. Gradually they come to realise

that all these smaller events are constituent of a larger whole.

FROM SMALL SEEDS...

Here's an example. Four different robberies take place over a month. These seem to be fairly routine crimes: truckloads of metal, a payroll van, a government courier and finally an electronic components factory. One of these should be worked through by the players, where they encounter Psyche, a powerful psychic who has erased the guard's memories. Psyche should manage to escape, with or without the stolen goods. Nothing more is said and the heroes continue with their 'normal' activities.

But then there's a break-in at a local nuclear power plant and radioactive material is stolen. When the team investigates it finds the security guards have indeed had their memory of the events erased. Now the heroes have a larger goal, without even knowing who is behind this plot or what its purpose is.

This is all the work of Doctor Strontium, the evil mad scientist, and his sidekick Psyche, who are building a giant radiation cannon with which to threaten the world. Further complexities could be Dr Strontium's government influence, or the revelation that Psyche is the separated-at-birth sibling of one of the heroes. Build up your plot over time and the players will appreciate it all the more when the final solution is reached.

Superheroic games are so much fun. If you don't already have one, don your cape and mask, fly/teleport/catch a 37 to the nearest game convention or store that stocks second-hand games, stride up to the counter and say: "I come in peace, law-abiding tradesman. I wish to purchase a copy of *Golden Heroes* from your good self. If this vexes you, I shall settle for *Marvel*. And if you're really stuck I'll consider *DC*." Alternatively, you could find a crumbly like me who bought them the first time round...

CHOOSING A GAME SETTING

Your setting is important. It's a good idea to base it somewhere you are either familiar with (your home town or nearest city is ideal) or have no knowledge of whatsoever. Campaigns based in your hometown lend a more realistic edge to your games. Your players will be able to envisage their surroundings with ease and will probably gain some satisfaction from foiling a plot to destroy the local university (depending on how they feel about it, of course). You can subtly alter real places and real people, use existing companies as a front for some evil organisation, or have the PCs meet in the (locked) back room of a local shop. Setting your game somewhere you've never been has equal benefits. You can make things up off the top of your head and no-one can contradict you, enabling you to take liberties with street layout and general geography to your advantage. The atmosphere of a real place such as, say, New York, is well known; even though you or your players may never have been there everyone has a feel for what it is probably like, clichéd though that may be. Next you have to decide just how common superheroes are in this world of yours. If people can't walk down the street without witnessing a battle between two super-powered beings, their attitude will be jaded. The arrival of a hero won't phase them and the media will probably largely ignore them. On the other hand, if there are only a few dozen in the country (or even the world), seeing a superhero will be a major event in most people's lives and will garner an atmosphere of enigma and mystique, somewhat akin to UFO sightings.

CREATING YOUR TEAM

Firstly, get your players to design their heroes before you even think about scenarios. Many superhero adventures rely on one or more of the heroes possessing a certain power or ability – there's no point in designing a scenario where the villain's Achilles' heel is his susceptibility to psychic attacks if none of your characters have psi powers.

Try not to mix and match your characters' fundamental attitudes too much. Unless you're playing a comedy game it's probably not a good idea to have an Uzi-laden avenger of the night working alongside a team of merciful do-gooders. It may be interesting, it may even produce some top roleplaying, but the team isn't actually going to do much because its members won't want to work together. Sure, the group should disagree, sometimes strongly, on the best way to solve a problem, but the last thing you want is three heroes facing off against one another over the use of large-calibre weaponry.

All heroes should be able to hold their own in a fight, although this doesn't necessarily have to be with their fists – Jubilee from the *X-Men* is a good example of a physically weak character who can still wreak havoc in a scrap. But aside from fighting, each hero should specialise in something and complement the others' expertise. They should all be able to do something that can aid the group. This could be some kind of resource they're able to call on from their day job, a friend in the police force, a specialist area of knowledge or even just being filthy rich. All these things will help the team to varying degrees in different situations.

Try to make sure your heroes are diverse, too. This may sound obvious, but a good rule of thumb is not to let more than one character have the same truly unusual power. By all means let them all have super strength, flight, agility – the mundane superpowers – but anyone with a power such as teleport, energy blast, alien origins or whatever should be the only one in the team to possess this particular power. This is more to do with drama than balance; it makes the players feel unique and special, and means that each hero is more crucial to the team.

Are your heroes a 'proper' team? How are they organised? Do they have a base with facilities they can all access? Are they on good terms with the police, and do they have access to their records? Perhaps they were assembled by a covert government organisation, such as DICE in *Golden Heroes*. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, they might meet every so often atop Tower Bridge and only work together on the toughest problems.

YOU CAN BE A TORTURED SOUL, A GOLDEN BOY WHO KISSES BABIES, OR A FUZZY BLOB FROM BETELGEUSE.



MAKING A COMEBACK?
1997 may prove to be the year that the superhero game makes a comeback. The new Fuzion-powered version of *Champions* is on the way, and Pinnacle Entertainment is already working on a game based on the *Wildstorms* series of comic books.