

PYRAMID[®]



Issue 3/2 December '08

**LOOKS LIKE A JOB FOR . . .
SUPERHEROES**

WHITE KNIGHTS AND RED GODS

by J. Edward Tremlett

POWERS AS METAPHORS

by Brian Rogers

THE CROOKED PATH

by Steven Marsh

SMALL-TIME CONQUERORS

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THE PLAYER KINGS

by Stephen Dedman

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Pale Blue: In This Issue

Brown: In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)

Dark Blue: **GURPS** Features

Purple: Other Features

Green: Recommended Reading

IN THIS ISSUE

Welcome to the second installment of the third volume of *Pyramid*. This issue is devoted to supers: those four-color defenders of truth, justice, and apple pie.

White Nights and Red Gods describes an alternate history for incorporating the rich backdrop of 20th-century Russia into a superhero campaign; it's almost entirely generic, with some advice at the end for how to make **GURPS** characters whose origins are tied to that history. *Small-Time Conquerors* gives insight into those who desire to subjugate but don't want the hassle of taking over the whole world; it includes example characters that are all high-level threats for **GURPS Supers** campaigns. *Powers as Metaphors* is a generic article that provides new ways of looking at a team's abilities. The *Superhero Newspaper* is a handy in-game prop that takes advantage of the PDF format. *Supporting Cast: The Player Kings* gives **GURPS** details for a team of evildoers whose theatrics have won the hearts of many, despite their nasty streak.

This month's *Random Thought Table* looks at what it means to be a reformed villain, and how you can play that odd type of hero in a supers game. The *Recommended Reading* articles examine super-powered inspirations, with and without capes. The *Humor* page is a constant thorn in the side of serious-minded features everywhere, and this month's *Last Word* is provided by supers expert Steve Long.

Whether you need villainous vexations, heroic inspiration, or historical justification, we hope this issue of *Pyramid* gives

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(LACK OF) LETTERS PAGE

As we assemble this magazine, the first issue of the newest version of *Pyramid* hasn't been out too long, so our minions haven't been able to sort through the thousands of pieces of e-mail from adoring fans. There has, however, been commentary – pro and con – on the Steve Jackson Games Forums at forums.sjgames.com under the *Pyramid* sub-forum; check it out!

Looks awesome, guys. Great work.

*– Crakkerjakk on the
Steve Jackson Games forums*

FNORD

We've received plenty of mail from folks who found the hidden challenge in the first issue. Good work! The current plan is to provide the results of that challenge in *Pyramid* #3/4, to give fantasy/historical commentary in a fantasy/historical publication.

Since it was so popular the first time around, this issue also contains a hidden challenge. Send us what we ask for to pyramid@sjgames.com, and we'll try to come up with something interesting to give you in return if you're among the first 100 to do so.

SUBMISSIONS

The new submissions process seems to be going well, and queries are being processed fairly efficiently. With luck, things will continue running smoothly as the articles start rolling in! (If this is your first issue and you're interested in writing for us, our revised guidelines are located online at www.sjgames.com/pyramid/writing.html.)

There's one matter that might not have been clear in the guidelines or the notes of our first issue: *Pyramid's* new production schedule means that we work on projects far in the

future. For example, by the time you read this, *Pyramid* #3/3 should be just about done. Furthermore, as we get better at the new format, we're hoping to get future issues even more cemented.

What this means for you, the prospective writer, is that it's possible you'll see an item on the wish list that's two or three issues (or more!) in the future, submit a query, and get back a response saying, "That sounds great; can you get the article to us in a week?"

If the deadline we give you is too close for your comfort, please write back and let us know so we won't be looking for your article.

WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

We love to get your feedback! Please feel free to send in letters and comments to pyramid@sjgames.com. In addition, we're looking for "New Tricks for Old Dogs"; did you think of a clever use for an article in a past issue? Maybe you used the Would-Be Conquerors as a PC group, or incorporated the alternate Russian supers history into an established Infinite World's campaign? If so, e-mail us a brief (no more than 400 words) description of what you did and how well it worked.



To get a good feel for your supers universe, try to figure out what kind of information would be in its "world records" books.

WHITE NIGHTS AND RED GODS

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

A Conjectural History of Superheroes in Pre-Soviet, World War II, and Early Cold War Russia

Many supers games set during the Cold War – especially the 1960s and 1970s – feature crazy Soviet “superheroes”: slogan-spouting commie villains in outrageous costumes who invariably have some kind of Soviet-sounding code name and work for the greater glory of the Motherland. It’s not inconceivable that state-sponsored and state-produced super-powers would dress and act that way, and be tagged as villains in the West for doing so. However, it ignores the possibility of freedom fighters, counter-cultural types, genuine heroes of the people, and actual supervillains.

To put those kinds of folks in perspective, along with the crazy, Marvel-style “super-commies,” requires an explanation of their origin. This alternate history covers the years between 1899, when the idea of codified superheroism first took root in the Victorian world, and 1964, when Khrushchev was deposed, after having committed the U.S.S.R. to mass-produce super-powered individuals as nuclear deterrents. *White Nights and Red Gods* is not meant to be an authoritative source on Russia, but rather a sampling of the great – and not-so-great – moments of that country’s supers-related history. Real-world facts have been changed to fit the narrative, and certain key events in actual history have been compacted or glossed over in favor of others. Some seeds are explored, while others are left bubbling in the background for GMs to use later.

This article could be used with any supers system (especially *Godlike*, *Adventure!*, *Aberrant*, and *Silver Age Sentinels*). Ideas for making *GURPS* characters are presented at the end.

BEFORE THE FALL (1899-1914)

Super-powered individuals no doubt existed in Russia prior to the end of the 19th century. Their exploits are either chronicled in various regions’ mythologies or as tall tales that took root and grew around their actions. No one thought to

call themselves “heroes” while performing brave deeds before 1899. Anyone who had an extra edge used it quietly, even anonymously, not wishing to draw undue attention.

That was to change in 1899, when the fabled Explorers Society met in New York City, in America. Six of the greatest children of the Victorian age banded together, launching an enterprise that would see the world further explored, its dangers catalogued and overcome, and any number of strange perils defeated. Between them, they established the Heroes’ Code (see p. 5), providing a model for all groups of heroes that came after.

The Russian intelligentsia, starving for new ideas, quickly grabbed hold of the concept of using ones’ natural talents to conquer the unknown and aid the weak. A handful of “Explorer Groups” (*Issledovateley*) were launched almost overnight, each of them vowing to uphold the code. But for many involved, it was a game for the rich and bored – one that lost its fun when they were finally forced to answer whether they supported the aristocracy whose unfortunate excesses they had vowed to fight.

Just as there were many unknowns in Russia’s vast holdings, so were there many unfortunates who needed protecting from the worst crime of all: the depredations of feudalistic poverty and oppression, kept in place by an autocratic tsar who remained distant from his people. The majority of the population lived in poor, agrarian conditions; famine, forced industrialization, and repression were the order of the day. Brutality, exile to a Siberian work camp (*Katorga*), and possible execution awaited those who ran afoul of the authorities.

The members of the high-minded Explorers Groups, who claimed to be heroes and stood in solidarity with the common people, were soon targeted with brutal reprisals by the dreaded Okhrana. The tsar’s secret police had been actively stamping out any kind of reform since the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, and they weren’t going to tolerate nonsense from

Russian myths and fairy tales are great resources to tap for character ideas from the region.

bored, overeducated rich types. As one example, aristocratic Explorer Anton Mikhailovich Zaitsev, came home to find his mansion sacked and burned, and his entire family dead, after he'd stopped thugs from roughing up a church congregation. He was far from the only hero to suffer such a punishment for doing the right thing.

Once the heat was turned up on them, most Explorer Groups became of no consequence, with only one or two members of each group staying true to their vows. Other Explorers, such as the Sons of St. Petersburg, learned from Anton's misfortune, abandoned their public personae, and went underground (or above ground, in the Sons' case – see below).

Others took a different kind of inspiration, becoming the semi-anonymous "People's Protectors" (*Zhashitniki Naroda*), who donned makeshift disguises and took code names in order to survive. Such heroes did what needed doing, gave a false name (sometimes made up on the spot), and ran off into the night before anyone could get a good description of them.

After peaceful demonstrators were gunned down on Bloody Sunday, the people's anger spread rapidly, fueling the strikes and demonstrations that formed the Russian Revolution of 1905. People's Protectors could be seen in costume during the strikes, cheering on the crowds and protecting them from police repression. Some were heroic enough to stop violent pogroms against Jews, who were a frequent target during riots. Others joined in, shamefully forgetting the Heroes' Code entirely or just using it in self-serving ways.

The tsar was forced into certain reforms, most of which were either illusory or rescinded as soon as possible. This, in turn, bred more resentment, which evolved into revolutionary fervor. Many would-be leaders were rounded up and either deported, sentenced to exile, or executed. This forestalled immediate revolution, but it planted its seeds even deeper, waiting for the right moment.

The foolishness of Europe's leaders provided that moment in 1914, when bad luck, nationalism, and secret deals combined to create the Great War. At first, there was cheering and enthusiasm, and many of the remaining Explorers and People's Protectors – like Son of St. Petersburg Kirill Donetsky – put aside their costumes and code names to enlist and fight for the Motherland. But after a time, the losses, horrors, and food shortages became too great to bear, and all love of the struggle went out of the people.

Revolution became inevitable, but whose faction would prevail?

The Sons of St. Petersburg

The first and arguably best of all Explorer Groups, the Sons of St. Petersburg, were formed in 1899 at the suggestion of industrialist Dmitry Gerasimov. He refused total leadership; he instead proposed they choose a new leader for each new expedition, based on whose skills best suited the adventure. For a time, they operated in the open at Gerasimov's mansion.

The Heroes' Code

A hero upholds the law, defending justice and righteousness in the face of evil.

A hero upholds decency, defending honor and virtue in the face of vice.

A hero upholds the truth, defending honesty and fidelity in the face of lies.

A hero upholds rationality, seeking the facts in any form they may take.

A hero upholds human life, refusing to take it for any reason.

Any man might do one of these things and be called a hero.

Any man who does *all* these things is, indeed, a superhero.

However, when the Okhrana became tired of their meddling, the Sons of St. Petersburg took to the skies in one of their members' majestic airships, the *Petrograd*.

The original Sons were Dmitry Gerasimov, a compassionate industrialist who foresaw totally automated factories and farms by 1930; Evgeniy Mikhailovsky, a high-society gambler who claimed to read minds with ease; Ruslan Stepanovich Knitsky, an explorer, airship pioneer, and one of the first men to set foot on Hy-Brasil after its disappearance; Kirill Donetsky, a two-gunned sellsword who had shot his way across the American West; and Alexandr Andreevich Dobrynin, a defrocked monk turned magician who claimed to be as powerful as Rasputin. When Knitsky died in 1907, he was replaced by Alina Aleksandrovna Yusupova, an equally capable explorer who had aided the group in their mapping of the great underworld kingdoms that lay beneath Siberia.

The Sons stayed together until 1917, when unfortunate events and divided loyalties broke them apart. The last straw revolved around whether to aid the imprisoned tsar or leave him to the revolutionaries, but there were other, interpersonal issues as well. Nonetheless, much like the American Explorers they emulated, the end of the group did not equal the end of its members' involvement in events in their country.

REVOLUTION AND AFTERMATH (1917-1924)

It is not known how much of a role super-powered individuals may have had in the inner political circles of the Bolsheviks. There are those who say that Lenin himself had powers – supposedly the ability to influence others' minds – but there is no proof of that claim; his genius at political maneuvering, fiery oratory, and great luck seems to have been purely mortal. A more likely explanation is that one or two of his allies may have possessed extraordinary abilities, using such powers to increase his influence as well as safeguard his life.

Come up with a motto or a battle cry for your team. Make it pithy yet inspiring.

Unquestionably, there was an eerie precision to how the Revolution unfolded, in spite of the “leaders” being exiled. In February of 1917, the government simply ended; a massive demonstration in St. Petersburg led to the military laying down its arms and the police siding with the protesters. The Okhrana was dissolved and its prisoners released. The weak government the tsar had put into place in 1905 assumed control as the tsar abdicated and was led off to exile.

Also unquestionable is that there were powers on all sides of the February Revolution. Two-fisted fighting action went on between heroes and armed gangs of criminals, and deadly backroom intrigues were the order of the day, with numerous heroes wearing their politics on their sleeves. Villains became heroes, heroes became revolutionaries, and double-agents provocateur were everywhere, playing all sides against the other for personal and political gain.

Over the next few months, as Revolutionary leaders snuck back into the Motherland, the divisions became deeper. Those who supported the Provisional Government schemed and fought against the Soviets over the question of whether to leave the Great War, while the small Menshevik (“Minority”) faction tried to find a place in the new Bolshevik-dominated landscape. Even the abdicated tsar, Nicholas II, had a number of aristocratic adventurers on his side, trying to steer events so as to bring the monarchy back with dignity.

The resulting October Revolution only made things more confusing. Those who had supported the Provisional Government now found themselves fighting alongside the Aristocrats and Mensheviks in the mish-mash of interests that made up the anti-Bolshevik White Russians. They also joined the revolutionaries who decried the Bolsheviks’ heavy-handed tactics, Socialists and Liberals who thought they’d gone too far, and anarchists who opposed *any* state on general principle.

One of the leading super figures among the White Russians was the Explorer Anton Mikhailovich Zaitsev, now calling himself Professor Winter (Professor Zimnev) and using his freeze-gas to fight alongside those he once cursed. His new, questionable allies included now-former Son of St. Petersburg Evgeniy Mikhailovsky, the fire-throwing anarchist known as the Black Star (*Chernaya Zvezda*), and the Menshevik shape-shifter Mouse (*Myshka-Norushka*).

They clashed with Bolshevik heroes like the expert boxer Man of Steel (*Zhelezniy Chelovek*); the electricity-wielding Spark (*Iskra*); the flying powerhouse Red Star (*Alaya Zvezda*); and the Voice (*Glas*), who could sing to inspire determination in allies and to make enemies fall to their knees. They also counted former Sons Dmitry Gerasimov and Alina Yusupova, now lovers, who saw hope for a better future for Russia in the Bolshevik cause.

The battles that raged from 1917 to 1923 were running and explosive, and for a short time, it seemed like the White Russians were assured of victory in the civil war. In the end, however, the Red Guard won out, if only because they were numerous and their opponents unfocused. Lenin’s beloved Bolshevik super-powers triumphed, and those who were on the losing side either fled the country or went underground, becoming “villains” in the eyes of the new regime.

Still, the war left Russia a mess that would take years to fix and a new kind of thinking to unite. It would require a man of steel.

THE NOBLE OPPOSITION (1925-1935)

Soon after Lenin’s death in 1924, it became clear that his deputy, Josef Stalin, was maneuvering to take control. He filled the party with allies at every level and then played one faction against another to whittle down any serious opposition. Stalin marginalized both foes and former allies, and then saw them removed, exiled, and in some cases assassinated (such as Leon Trotsky in 1940). He also planned the massive transformation of Russia to a state-run economy buttressed by aggressive campaigns of industrialization and forced collective farming.

To succeed, he sought the expertise of scientists whose work was so far ahead of the curve that it often seemed like lunacy. One was the infamous Dr. Grammachikov, who claimed to have perfected a “death ray” that could shoot down aircraft, melt tanks, and scuttle warships. After a successful test at the Moscow aerodrome, Stalin became enamored of the idea, and he saw to the construction of ray-equipped defense towers all along the U.S.S.R.’s borders. He also became fascinated with the work of Elena Egorovna Golovach, a brilliant (if highly unethical) biochemist who promised loyalty drugs, keys that could unlock the powers of the mind, and a formula that could turn an ordinary man into a super man. He gladly set her to work, and though she eventually fled the U.S.S.R. for America, her research eventually proved very useful indeed.

Stalin very carefully cultivated the aid and friendship of the remaining Bolshevik supers, most notably Dmitry Gerasimov, whose ideas concerning the rapid automation of Russia’s farms were intriguing. Gerasimov – still mourning the accidental wartime loss of his love, Alina, while fighting Professor Winter – was easily talked into handing his more radical plans over to the state. In return, Stalin promised him free rein to hunt down Professor Winter and his cohorts, most of whom were still on the run. He was granted aid from the Red Army, as well as the dreaded NKVD, which had supplanted the Okhrana in the new government.

Gerasimov would not have to wait long. As soon as the forced collectivization of farms turned the lives of lowly farmers into a living hell, the non-Bolshevik People’s Protectors – now branded villains – came out of their hiding places to try to stop the insane race to total, crushing automation. A new, more powerful Black Star (a woman named Natalia Dubrovskaya who could *become* fire) joined forces with a badly wounded Mouse and a well-paid former Son Kirill Donetsky. Dozens more donned masks to join what would be called the Noble Opposition.

Curiously, there was no direct sign of Professor Winter, though it was whispered that he supplied the Noble Opposition with weapons. Others claimed these weapons came from former Son Evgeniy Mikhailovsky, who fled for safer climes and better gambling at the end of the Civil War.

In the comics, globetrotting heroes never have problems with languages. In the real world, it’s a lot more complicated.

The Bolshevik heroes soon joined the battle, and the rural wilderness and farmlands were alive with a fire that had not been seen since the Civil War. Donetsky supplied the tactics, which were, by necessity, largely hit-and-run. They were also sloppy, given that he'd gone nearly insane during the wholesale slaughter of the Great War. But they were effective in that they stopped some of the more radical changes from occurring, most notably by destroying Gerasimov's more outré and complicated machinery faster than it could be replaced and rebuilt.

Still, the Protectors could not be everywhere. They saved many, but millions more were killed or displaced from things no super-power could stop: famine, mass arrests and executions, and exile to the new camps in Siberia. Their power base – the people they were protecting – soon lost their willingness and strength to fight, leaving only their Protectors in the field against an endless flood of government-backed heroes and troops. And yet they fought on.

A furious Gerasimov made plans to draw his enemies out for a final showdown. He unveiled a half-mile wide, monstrous “mountain eater” that could plane and till acre after acre of rocky, uneven ground. He let it loose on a substantial holdout farming community, where the machine ate their houses and livelihoods with massive iron teeth. Gerasimov lurked above the clouds in the freshly refitted *Petrograd* with a cohort of Bolshevik supers, waiting for his foes.

The resulting fight took the lives of numerous heroes on both sides, most notably Red Star and Mouse, and came down to a tooth-and-nail swordfight aboard the *Petrograd* between former allies Gerasimov and Donetsky, now both insane from what they'd lost. The *Petrograd* crash-landed right atop the Mountain-Eater, destroying both vehicles in a massive explosion that neither crew survived.

Black Star sounded the retreat. The Protectors who still lived fled. Apart from the occasional “terrorist” act against a farming machine or two in the years to come, that was the end of the Noble Opposition.

THE GREAT DISAPPEARING (1936-1940)

With victory over his super-powered enemies all but assured (save for a few loose ends) and his empire secured by batteries of death rays, Stalin tasted total, complete control at last. But he was not content to merely seize power; he had to cement that power with the total elimination of his enemies, their friends and families, and *their* friends and families. His victory was soon followed by mass arrests, imprisonments, exile, and execution of the “politically unreliable” from all walks of life – especially the political and military – to the point that somewhere between 700,000 and 2,000,000 Soviets died for reasons that ranged from being too revolutionary to not revolutionary enough. Some would come back, eventually, but many would never be seen nor heard from again.

Stalin also decided that he did not need his super-powered allies anymore. Lenin may have embraced the idea of fantastic

Oh, to Be a Villain!

Most of the “supervillains” in this article were those who were on the “wrong” side of the government at the time (though sometimes on the “right” side of history). But it would be incorrect to state that no one used amazing abilities for wealth, power, or plain old evil. Here are some of the more infamous ones of this era.

The Brains (Mozgovoy Tsent): A criminal mastermind in every sense of the word, he meticulously planned crimes for thieves and lesser villains for a generous cut of the proceeds. Those who refused his help were captured by the authorities (with his aid).

The Comedian (Komedinyyakter): A “triple-jointed” jester, the Comedian wanted nothing more than to become the greatest gentleman thief ever. He stole things of high value and then sent them back to their owners after a time, just to let them know that nothing was beyond his reach.

The Hive (Krapivnitsa): A state-sponsored science experiment gone wrong, Dr. Ivan Mikhailovich Sudoplatov's 1935 attempt to tune the minds of different people into the same frequency created a group mind that desired to grow even stronger. Inclusion was achieved by crude brain surgery: A circuit-laden spike was driven into the back of the skull of a suitable candidate, making him a member of the Hive. Since all members had access to everything everyone else knew, the group could be reduced (that is, killed) to a single person, only to have it come back later.

The Tsar: A super-strong, apparently immortal would-be conqueror who claimed to be Peter the Great reborn. He burst upon the scene in 1918, after the death of the Romanovs, and demanded to rule the nation once more. He proved a major nuisance to heroes on both sides during the Civil War and cropped up time and again, even after being utterly “destroyed.”

proletariats aiding the cause, but Stalin saw them much as he saw all other people – threats to his own power. And any threat he saw had to be dealt with, harshly.

So he formed the Night Watchmen (*Nochnoy Storozh*), a special team of hero hunters recruited from some of the most brutal and driven agents of the NKVD. Stalin had them deal with remaining Explorers, non-Bolshevik People's Protectors, and anyone else showing signs of powers or talents. Those supers whose powers were strong and flashy were to be liquidated outright, while more manageable heroes could be sent to forced labor in exile (unless they resisted).

If a hero stumbles across two wildly clad beings fighting in a foreign land, how can he tell who's the “good guy” so he can help the right side?

So began the disappearing. Heroes old and new were roused from their homes and hiding places, made to confess their “crimes” and turn in their allies, and then sent to execution or exile. Those who may have been heroes in the making were arrested on suspicion and hearsay, forced to admit to criminal acts they had nothing to do with, and served the same harsh “justice” as their forebears.

Once that pogrom was underway, Stalin took advantage of the momentum and had his former super-powered allies eliminated as well. People like the Voice and the Spark were taken out for “political retraining,” gassed into unconsciousness, and shot. Man of Steel was bound in unbreakable chains and sent off to Siberia, screaming in rage at his betrayal. He was far from the only one thus betrayed.

After these supers died or were sent off to exile, their life stories were buried along with them. Photographs of the Bolshevik heroes were altered or destroyed to hide their existence. The great scientific discoveries and expeditions of the Explorer Groups were sent down the memory hole, and history was rewritten to suit Stalin’s needs for the betterment of the state. Within a human lifetime, there would be little left to suggest that Red Gods had walked among men, save for the word of discredited criminals who would soon be captured.

But Stalin underestimated his enemies’ will to live. Protectors who survived the culling banded together against the harsh conditions of the camps. Those who had been on opposite sides came together under shared hardship and pooled their resources without much thought of what had happened before. There were some grudges, of course, but it soon became clear to even the hardest-headed among the prisoners that bad blood only led to bloodletting, and the guards were too eager to take advantage of fights.

That said, most of those who entered the camps as heroes would not leave it the same way. A new class of criminal was born there: “thieves in law,” whose code of honor became legendary. They would come to form one of the most widespread and fearsome of criminal organizations: the *Organizatsiya*, better known as the Russian Mob. And while most of the rank-and-file prisoners who would form that group were normal humans with ordinary talents, many of those whose powers had earned them a trip to Siberia would eventually return with an eye for getting back what they were owed. And the criminal organization would be happy to have them on their side.

THE RESURGENCE (1941-1945)

Stalin’s official disapproval of super-powers came to an abrupt end thanks to one man: Adolph Hitler.

While Stalin had been persecuting and executing his native heroes, the Nazi party – in its quest for the fabled *Übermensch* – had been fanatically cultivating them. So when Germany violently rescinded her previous “understanding” with the

U.S.S.R. in June of 1941, German supers were on the forefront of the drive against the Soviet Union. They soon had the weakened, post-Purge Red Army on the run.

Stalin had believed that his batteries of Death Rays would prove an effective deterrent against any German double-dealing, but after seeing film footage of what the Nazis could do with their “heroes,” he knew that he had gambled and lost. The most powerful among the enemy were not even fazed by the blasts; they tore into the emplacements with contemptuous ease, allowing their lesser allies to charge through. At last, Stalin saw the wisdom of having such beings on his side.

However, he declined to set any of those he’d imprisoned free, as he felt – perhaps correctly – that they would bear a grudge against the regime, making their loyalty suspect. He instead instructed the Night Watchmen to give new supers they found the choice of serving the Motherland. Such volunteers would be sent to a new project that would train them in the use of their talents and take steps to ensure their loyalty. Further, he would have the official story changed to reflect the current reality: The Night Watchmen’s pogrom was only to find disloyal supers who served Germany; those who surrendered themselves to serve the state would be among the Motherland’s greatest heroes.

He also charged this project with a long-term goal: the creation of supers they could completely control and trust. The first fruits of the program were a phalanx of bodyguards to protect Stalin from German supers, but each subsequent group was sent to the front to deal with the Nazi advance. While these super-forces were cultivated and trained, the U.S.S.R. bought itself time by throwing all the citizens they could muster at the German menace, including non-super exiles who would be granted freedom if they volunteered to fight.

Several brilliant exiles were recalled from the special light-labor camps for scientists (*Sharashka*) to work on what would become Project: October Reborn (*Proekt: “Vozrozhdeniye Oktiabr”*). Their first (mostly) secret wave of tests on “volunteers” (criminals, madmen, and fellow victims of the Purge) were based on Elena Golovach’s partial notes, and created more accidents and deaths than successes. Soon the scientists knew what *not* to do, and, after giving those few misshapen – but rabidly loyal – survivors to Stalin for his bodyguards, they started to search for suitable candidates for the second wave.

As the Night Watchmen combed the cities for “volunteers” for the Project, political officers went through the ranks of the Red Army searching for those whose exploits showed promise and who might make good rallying points for others. A woman who killed 10 of the enemy in fierce hand-to-hand combat, wielding only a humble peasant’s sickle, was an early volunteer. So, too, was a man who attacked the Nazis with nothing but an iron bar; a woman who created duplicates of herself under battlefield stress; and a fellow who, when hit by a grenade, became living steel and deflected the shrapnel back toward his attackers.

For characters with a strong cultural Russian heritage, check out GURPS Russia. It contains information on Russian history and folklore from the 10th to the 18th centuries.

What Project: October Reborn Can Do for You

During World War II, the Project had one main program, known as Advanced Training, and three subprograms. Not everyone went from Advanced Training to a subprogram; many had talents that could be put to immediate use on the battlefield, with some refinement. But those extraordinary citizens who volunteered to be made amazing were usually run through one or more of the subprograms, in the hopes of creating new, totally loyal heroes for the Motherland.

Advanced Training was a hellish boot-camp experience combined with medical tests and trials, plus extreme loyalty conditioning involving hypnagogic drugs (known collectively as the “Golovach treatment”). The weeks of pain and torture were meant to identify the recruits’ limits and talents, so they could be put into the proper subprogram. The “treatment” was combined with seemingly endless “suggestion sessions,” implanting a fierce desire to serve the will of Stalin, and through him the good of the Motherland.

Those slated for General Advancement were subjected to an electro-chemical bath that granted strength, speed, agility, and stamina; this treatment closely matched the one given to the American superhero Captain Patriot.

However, in Elena Golovach’s absence, the Soviet Scientists didn’t quite perfect the formula. Premier heroes Hammerer and Thresher were among the few survivors of the treatment, which had a 65% mortality rate.

Another subprogram was Psychic Research. Those with mental talents were examined, tested, and given certain chemical formulae in an attempt to boost their powers. The mortality rate for those treatments was “only” 45%, but at least 50% of the survivors were driven insane by the drugs, their side effects, or the waves of perception that human minds were not meant to handle.

The “safest” subprogram, then, was the High-Tech Weapons Division. Many of the Project’s subjects were sent to Weapons after General Advancement; their bodies could now wield a close-combat weapon that weighed more than 80 pounds, or withstand the strain of using guns that would break normal people in half if they fired them. That said, the weapons were often wonky and dangerous, and they saw true testing for the first time in actual combat conditions. Somewhere between 40% and 65% of the weapons malfunctioned as a matter of course, while 25% malfunctioned catastrophically, sometimes killing their wielders – and occasionally their units.

The first (acknowledged) wave of heroes from Project: October Reborn was unveiled on June 22, 1942 – a year to the day after the Nazis’ invasion. “Hammerer” (*Molotoboyets*) and “Thresher” (*Zhmitsa*) were presented as the vanguard of the Project, their appearance based on Vera Mukhina’s famous “Worker and Kolkhoz Woman” statue (only with larger, two-handed versions of their tools). A new, metal-skinned Man of Steel stood behind them, alongside a score of identical female soldiers: “the Collective Woman” (*Kolhoznitsa*).

The effect of seeing the Project’s foremost heroes together, along with many others, was just as anticipated. Witnessing the Motherland’s new generation of heroes in action sent the beleaguered Soviet troops’ morale soaring, creating another surge of volunteerism. The tide of battle changed almost overnight without firing a single shot.

Weeks later, when the Soviet heroes finally clashed with Nazi supers, the earth of the Motherland shook and bled. Hammerer and Thresher and their many, mighty allies fought the war well, battling and overcoming several Nazi supers and helping ordinary soldiers push the front back to German soil. Once they came within effective distance of Berlin, they teamed up with those few Allied super-soldiers who had made it that far, working together to stop the last, few Nazi “heroes” from activating *Jörmungandr* – Hitler’s insane doomsday plan.

Save for a few cleanup actions – such as finding Adolph Hitler, who Stalin claimed had escaped Berlin – the major part

of the Great Patriotic War was over. There was joy and cheering, and endless parades. Project: October Reborn was wound down, re-tasked with maintaining the surviving heroes and continuing their loyalty training.

They had served well in the Great Patriotic War, but now a new, colder one began.

THE GREAT PROMISE BROKEN (1946-1953)

Life in post-war U.S.S.R. was grand for the heroes of the war. Hammerer and Thresher were elevated to near-godhood – second only to Stalin, at least in the propaganda – and used as symbols, saviors, and cultural ambassadors. Anything Stalin wanted the people to cheer for, or pay attention to, would be credited to both his vision and the duo’s aid and input. They could do no wrong in anyone’s eyes.

They had another, less savory role in the new, post-war world: super-powered deterrents. Heroes on both sides of the Iron Curtain kept a watchful eye on one another, endlessly arguing why their own side was right and the other wrong. America had the bomb, which made attacking them a suicidal proposition – death-ray emplacements or no – but there were enough human powerhouses on both sides of the barrier to make either country wary of open hostilities.

Genre rule: No two people on a team – or anyone those teammates know – share the same first name, no matter how large the team. No two people share the same last name, either, unless they’re related to each other.

In 1949, everything changed yet again. The U.S.S.R. detonated a nuclear weapon, bringing the nation into the atomic age and putting America on notice that the two powers were on equal footing. That wasn't good enough for Stalin, though; much like Hitler, he became obsessed with the idea of a nation of supermen – only he had the technology and machinery of state to pull it off.

In order to heighten security, Project: October Reborn was moved to a “closed city” in 1949, which was named Supercity One. This followed the same model as the “atomic cities” where Soviet research into nuclear weapons was carried out, except that *everyone* knew where Supercity One was, and what went on there. The city was a self-contained marvel; it grew all food needed for the Project and generated its own power. The scientists, technicians, and guards assigned to the Project worked and lived in the city with their families; they were not permitted to leave for security purposes.

Once Project: October Reborn had settled into Supercity One, Stalin ordered them to begin making new supers, with the goal again to keep their numbers as high as possible. But there would be no more forced “volunteers” by way of the Night Watchmen; this time they would openly accept volunteers who could pass a battery of physical, mental, and loyalty tests. Since the Red Gods were treated so well by a grateful state – given special housing, pensions, and other perks normally reserved for war heroes – there was no shortage of applicants. The Project only accepted one volunteer out of a hundred, and that volunteer had only a 25% chance of successfully “graduating,” . . . but the staggering number of applicants meant that the Project mustered out at least 25 new super-powers a year.

Interestingly enough, Stalin balked at the idea of mass-producing super-powers through genetic means. Several of his advanced scientists proved that they could, using a high-tech fertilization technique, create babies using cells from successful Soviet heroes. While the data was sound and the experiments proved successful, the dictator was too distrustful of genetics, having decried it as a “bourgeois” science for many years. Thus the plan to “farm” super-powered babies was shelved, though not entirely discarded.

A more tangible – and ideologically acceptable – fruit of the Project was a stable of precognitive talents. Stalin, convinced of their usefulness several times during the war, surrounded himself with a bureau of seers; he became obsessed with making the right decisions to secure his legacy. Each seer was known as a Prophet (*Prorok*), and given high consideration within his court.

But precognition was never an exact science; all Stalin's Prophets had differing accounts of the future, and none could provide easy answers to difficult, complex questions. Plus, those who didn't give him the answers he wanted to hear were declared “defective,” and sent back to the Project for painful – often fatal – “modifications.” This cultivated a culture of willful lying, misdirection, and intrigue within the bureau.

One fateful night in the early 1950s, several of Stalin's favorite Prophets – led by the now-infamous Anatoly A. Kuznetsov – told Stalin . . . *something*. What they said was never known, but those who knew Stalin best said that, after that night, he was more paranoid than ever.

Great things were done in secret, without written records. Stalin's bodyguards clandestinely killed the workers, overseers, and commanders of these quiet undertakings, so that none could reveal what they had done. Only Stalin, his bodyguards, and a seer or two knew the whole truth.

In 1952, Hammerer and Thresher presided over a great ceremony handing the leadership of the U.S.S.R.'s heroes over to their subordinates: Man of Steel and the Collective Woman. They told the assembled throng that they were undertaking a great and long mission for the Motherland, and would someday return victorious. After that, they walked away and effectively vanished. Officials spread rumors of their whereabouts and activities. Many of the rumors were contradictory (including tales of space-travel experiments), but no one truly knew what had happened except Stalin and his Prophets.

Stalin died in 1953, taking most of his secrets with him. Months later, in August, the Soviet Union exploded its first thermonuclear bomb, putting the country well ahead of its American rivals. As a show of defiance to the world, the dreaded death-ray emplacements were decommissioned and dismantled, as the U.S.S.R. had proven that it did not need them any more.

WE WILL BURY YOU (1953-1964)

Upon Stalin's death, a fierce and brutal struggle for power occurred behind the scenes. The eventual winner was Nikita Khrushchev: a rude, cantankerous, and unschooled (but very intelligent) man who sought to undo a great deal of what Stalin had done. Collective farming was replaced by more “modern” methods, the gulags were emptied of most of their political prisoners, the NKVD became the KGB, and the Night Watchmen were repurposed yet again – now acting to hunt down resurgent “supervillains.”

Both Stalin's bodyguards and seers' bureau made new friends with the ruling committee, but the latter were swept into the dustbin during Khrushchev's campaign of de-Stalinization. The new First Secretary saw them as the lying, unreliable schemers that they were, and had them either returned to the Project for “modifications” or taken someplace quiet by the bodyguards and shot. Some Prophets, like Kuznetsov, saw what was coming and escaped, but most were not so lucky.

While the so-called Cult of Stalin was uprooted and dismantled, certain things stayed exactly as they were, most notably the continued mass-production of supers. But it soon became apparent that something was not right with the Project, a point that was hammered into Khrushchev when

For a GURPS Infinite Worlds campaign, imagine that every alternate Earth has a “supers” counterpart. For example, the existence of Reich-5, Britannica-6, and Dixie-3 also indicates the existence of Reich-5(S), Britannica-6(S), and Dixie-3(S). For worlds that are already super-powered in some fashion, maybe they are the “S” variants for another (mundane) world . . . or perhaps such alternate Earths have counterparts that have more or different supers!

two of his inherited bodyguards tried to murder him one night, claiming that he was “a pretender.”

Khrushchev ordered another look at Project: October Reborn, and found something truly terrifying: their heroes were going mad.

The problem had raised its head shortly after Stalin’s death. In the heroes’ minds, Stalin was synonymous with the country. Now that he was gone, some heroes proved incapable of following orders. The technicians ran the afflicted heroes through “reprogramming” to place their loyalty with the state as a whole, rather than its current leader, but some could not be cured.

Research into the cause of the mental illness showed that while the conditioning itself was perfectly safe, the chemicals they used to shore it up were terribly dangerous – especially when used in combination with General Advancement. The hypnagogic drugs behaved like a slow-acting poison that eventually caused terrible chemical imbalances in the mind, driving almost every recipient insane. This meant nearly every super that had been created and conditioned by the Project was a walking time bomb.

Khrushchev’s men quickly suppressed the information, ordering those heroes who had gone completely crazy to be locked up in a secure facility in Kostroma, where they could be warehoused and studied by a repurposed group of Night Watchmen. He also ordered a halt to the use of drugs to ensure loyalty, preferring to use propaganda and increased rewards. But the fact remained: The great tactical edge of the Soviet Union’s defense had a fatal flaw, and before long, it would corrupt every asset.

Faced with that terrible reality, Khrushchev did what was considered unthinkable only years before: In 1953, he ordered the Project to begin the “baby farm,” using samples of Hammerer and Thresher’s cells. Three hundred healthy women from a nearby prison were offered a chance to serve out their sentence in the service of the state. They were artificially inseminated, 100 at a time, three months apart. The babies were raised at Supercity One, given to “donor families” who agreed to be sealed in the city and raise the offspring as their own, until it was time for the children to become inducted into the Project.

The next few years were tense and cautious ones. Khrushchev continued in his deconstruction of Stalin’s excesses, only now without his inherited bodyguards, relying instead on newer generations of heroes. Soviet supers were clandestinely watched for mental illness; when they started to show serious problems, they were permanently “reassigned” to the facility at Kostroma, along with the bodyguards and other heroes who’d already started to slip mentally.

As a result, many of the heroes of the Great Patriotic War had to vanish from the public eye, which made the newer recruits less sure of their place in things. They were also forbidden to appear in public outside of the Soviet Union, as Khrushchev feared they might develop mental problems while away, thus revealing the country’s internal problems to the

Off the Reservation

Thus is revealed the main reason why so many “super-commies” talk, dress, and act so insane: They *are* insane. The drugs they were given during loyalty training have eroded their bodies’ abilities to make or use various neural chemicals, and their sanity has suffered as a result. Modern medicine might have drugs that could counteract such problems, but “happy pills” weren’t in huge supply back in the late 1960s.

That said, not every crazy Red supervillain was doing what unseen voices told him to do. There were times the Soviet government needed something high-profile done that it couldn’t be directly blamed for, which required a large degree of plausible deniability. To that end, they kept a number of extreme cases locked away in secret, letting them loose on the West from time to time when they needed a really spectacular distraction.

This, for example, explains the 1965 New York invasion by giant, red, radioactive spider monkeys. The Red Ape’s insane plan to take over the city was just a cover for the KGB to break into the British embassy and steal vital information about the U.K.’s defense program. By the time the loutish Red villain and his super-monkeys were captured, the covert operation was long over and the culprits already retreating back to the Motherland.

West. It is little wonder, then, that Russian heroes from this era seemed weak and diffident when they weren’t raging with insanity.

The real signs of superiority came from successes like Sputnik and the specter of thermonuclear missiles. However, failed conflicts such as the one over missiles in Cuba – however terrifying at the time – made the U.S.S.R. look like a paper tiger, ultimately leading to the decline of Khrushchev’s power. He would live long enough to see the first few waves of the new generation of heroes enter the Project, but he would have no say in their education or use.

That would be left to different, less generous men.

THE ROADS AHEAD

Although *White Nights and Red Gods* ends at Khrushchev’s fall in 1964, the seeds for future conflicts have already been sown. Here is a glimpse of this history’s “future.”

- The first wave of baby-farmed superheroes turns 16 in 1969, and is handed over to the Project for evaluation. As expected, about 50% of the children show signs of manifesting their true parents’ powers. These are inculcated with loyalty

In any campaign set in the modern era, resources that allow you to replicate the real world are useful. GURPS SWAT, GURPS Cops, and GURPS Special Ops are good for inspiration.

GURPS Considerations

The Explorers were generally late-Victorian adventurers whose point costs come out between 150-250 points. Wildcard skills, Wealth, high attributes, and a minor superhuman advantage and/or advanced steampunk gadget were all they needed to call themselves heroes. They may have had Rank and high Status, but these slipped away as the Revolution drew closer.

People's Protectors were less about Wealth and Status and more about two-fisted pulp action. These characters are built on 200-300 points, giving them access to one or two flashy advantages, if not bona fide super-powers, in addition to Talents. As the Great Purge drew nearer, these point totals came closer to 350.

Grammachikov's "death ray" should be treated as a TL11 blaster rifle (p. B280) that was mercilessly encumbered by its power requirements. Heroes who wielded smaller versions in combat had a TL11 blaster pistol that had a battery backpack weighing 200 pounds.

Anyone going through Project: October Reborn was treated to the "Golovach Treatment" in Advanced Training, which gave the Fanaticism [-15] and Sense of Duty (To the Soviet government) [-10] disadvantages. The drugs that went along with it gave them a time limit of $(IQ + HT)/2 +$

1d years of normal operation before 40 points of serious mental disadvantages befell them.

General Advancement gave the following 255-point meta-trait: +8 ST [80]; +2 DX [40]; +5 HT [50]; +5 FP [15]; +1.00 Basic Speed [20]; Combat Reflexes [15]; Damage Resistance 1 [5]; Enhanced Move 1 [20]; and Recovery [10].

"Volunteers" who had powers going into the Project tend to be built on 200-350 points and were exempted from General Advancement. As a result, it took longer for the "Golovach Treatment" to create mental problems, and they lasted $(IQ + HT)/2 + 3d$ years before developing 40 points of serious mental disadvantages.

The drugs given to potential psionics to awaken latent talents gave survivors 50 points to split between psionics and complementary advantages. Those with Oracle and/or Precognition stood a good chance of becoming part of Stalin's Seers' Bureau.

Children from the baby farm who developed powers naturally inherited their true parents' 255-point meta-trait after puberty. They were given the "Treatment" (Fanaticism [-15] and Sense of Duty [-10] disadvantages), but *without* the drugs.

programming (but no chemicals), trained in their special abilities, given advanced weapons, and then unveiled to the world as a sign of the U.S.S.R.'s superiority. They will live as gods above the people, as did their parents. Those who do not develop powers are kept at Supercity One as workers, trainers, and foster parents.

- After the first wave, the U.S.S.R. no longer wants volunteers for its superhero program. The Night Watchmen seek to capture and detain anyone who shows signs of independent powers. This leads many supers to go on the run, where they fall in with dissidents, defect to the West, or become street vigilantes or supervillains (inside or outside of the Russian Mob).

- Three years after the first wave, all "official" heroes who pre-date the baby farm are rounded up for "retraining" and sent to the Kostroma facility as a precaution. There they are warehoused under harsh palliative "care" and left to rot, save for those let loose to provide distractions. Some escape and fall in with the independents, as they have nothing left to lose, but their insanity follows.

- There is a breakout from Kostroma in 1976. Hundreds of psychotic super-powers get free; only half of the escapees are caught and/or killed by the Night Watchmen before the U.S.S.R.'s 1991 collapse.

- Soviet heroes are active throughout the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989), but are endlessly harried by both

Western heroes acting in secret and insane former Soviet heroes who escaped from Kostroma, seeking revenge on their "upstart replacements." Between these problems, and the tenacity of the Mujahideen, many heroes join ordinary soldiers as "Zinky Boys" (coming home in zinc coffins). The war goes nowhere for eight years and takes an additional two to fully end, leaving the Soviet Union badly weakened.

- When the Soviet Union fails in 1991, the formerly fêted superheroes no longer have state funding and housing and have to find their own way. The new government sees to the welfare of those counter-cultural supers who supported the downfall, as well as a few of the higher-profile former-Soviet heroes, but the rest are seen as a bad reminder of the past. Some of these "surplus heroes" (*izlishnyegeroi*) sell themselves to other countries needing super-powered muscle, some join the *Organizatsiya* or other criminal organizations, and others break out on their own to be truly independent superheroes.

Thanks to Arseny Kuznetsov and CJ Tremlett, for help with Russian and inspiration.

Genre rule: The more useful and high-powered a non-super contact is, the more likely he is not stuck behind a desk like most high-powered people. Police commissioners in supers settings spend more time on the streets than some real-world beat cops.

SMALL-TIME CONQUERORS

BY BRIAN ROGERS

When it comes to taking over the world, *masterminds* rely on a plan – something big, be it flashy or subtle, that overcomes the myriad obstacles of taking over . . . well, *everything*. Some villains, while they have the drive and vision, don't have the mental chops to design such a plan. These people are *conquerors*. For them, it's better to start small (and perhaps end small) by taking over their own city, small country, or geographic region. There are several good reasons for doing so.

First, a smaller area means less opposition. If they take over, say, a small Central American country with minimal tourist presence, it's possible the world might not notice or won't see any advantage in getting involved. The smaller state will have a smaller population (fewer super-powered people), a smaller army (no patriotic super-soldiers), and probably not much of a high-tech infrastructure (no techno-heroes or radiation accidents). The initial conquest and its immediate aftermath will go more smoothly.

Second, the smaller area means less distance to project force. People outside a conqueror's proximity are harder to intimidate. They plot, rebel, and do all the things that make world domination so difficult. Masterminds have ways to deal with them that don't involve direct retaliation; conquerors don't, and so have a practical limit on their dominion. Unless the conqueror has reliable henchmen or powerful troops, the smaller area works to his benefit.

Finally, the smaller area means easier logistics. It's good to conquer a state, but then someone has to keep it at least somewhat functional. That's a pain, especially for those without mastermind tendencies. Sure, a grand vizier can handle it, but there are trust issues. These bureaucratic necessities eat into the conqueror's time. However, if these tasks aren't done, then the state doesn't provide as much overall benefit, people are more likely to rebel, and international groups start to notice. Smart conquerors don't take over more than they can control.

Given the advantages to the small-state conquest, it's easy to see what sort of mentality would be drawn to it: someone with limited needs (and, really, who *needs* to take over the world?), an awareness of their limitations, and enough power to make a creditable claim. Enjoying combat is a plus, but not a requirement; conquerors will often settle down once they

meet their immediate needs, dreaming of the occasional battle with an upstart hero but not wanting to risk what they have by overplaying their hand.

It's easy to work a conqueror into your game: The conqueror is either trying to take over somewhere and the heroes find out, or has already taken over somewhere and the heroes find out. There are various ways to implement either idea.

For heroic detectives, or supers who are intimately connected with the target region, it's best to provide clues of the assault in a form the heroes understand: An urban vigilante discovers sleeper agents, the mystic has prophetic dreams, agents get a briefing from a concerned analyst, and so on. (Players of such heroes appreciate the option of seizing the initiative, so it's best not to blindside them.)

*When you have gained a victory,
do no push it too far; 'tis sufficient to
let the company and your adversary
see 'tis in your power but that you are
too generous to make use of it.*

– Eustace Budgell

Alternatively, the adventurers might find out by accident. While their plans might not be as susceptible to chance as much as masterminds' are, conquerors suffer from "want of a nail" issues: If the heroes unknowingly disrupt some part of the plan, they will find themselves in the middle of the conquest. From a game standpoint, this is better than being blind-sided, but usually not as engaging as being proactively informed. Conquerors' plans seldom reach mastermind levels, usually involving some variant on building up forces (for non-powerhouses), severing the target's communications, rolling in with overwhelming strength, and claiming control.

Adventure/subplot idea: Archfoes of the heroes try to get laws passed to make those with extranormal abilities vow to not use their powers, or face jail time. (The bad guys are already breaking other laws; they have no intention of complying with this one.)

As a final option, the heroes can find out after the fact. Perhaps they turn on the news and learn that Middlestania fell to the Behemoth, or they are briefed by the Department of State on the tyrant of Costa Diablo. Maybe they get a blood-stained letter from a friend who picked the wrong vacation destination. They might even wake up to the sound of eye-beams blasting helicopters out of the sky with news pundits inquiring where the supers are and how the rest of Illinois will react to Chicago now being the demesne of Lord Slaughter.

The nature of small-time conquerors makes them more believable than world-domination types. Turkmen Bashi held absolute power in Turkmenistan for over a decade, going so far as to rename days of the week after himself – imagine if he has the strength of an army (instead of merely an army with strength)? The secretive military junta in Burma/Myanmar could easily be a front for a conqueror, or just be replaced by one. International politics make individual control of small states practical as long as the conqueror doesn't overreach.

Here are some basic conqueror motivations with examples.

THE SUPER-BULLY

The super-bully's goal is the sense of power over others, with some instant gratification. It's not conquest so much as a reward for being the toughest person around. A super-bully is most likely to control a small town, but the conquest structure is the same: Get a small gang, cut the communication, display overwhelming force, and trust that fear will keep people in line. He generally doesn't have a plan after his initial conquests other than enjoying himself and spreading fear (at least until the heroes turn up).

Building a Super-Bully in GURPS

The super-bully really only needs two things: being distinctly super (usually requiring a point total of 500 or more points) and the disadvantage Bully. Of course, there are a few ways to build on the concept. Their powers tend toward the flashy (using the Brick or Blaster templates from **GURPS Supers**), but anything that makes people afraid of them will work, such as the Man Plus template with a high Intimidation skill. The Mesmerist template works (since it allows for both control and fear) as do the Improviser and Shaper templates; Anthony Freemont from the *Twilight Zone* episode "It's a Good Life" is a Mesmerist/Shaper super-bully. Heroes coming in to deal with the situation might have a shock if the super-bully is, like Anthony, a 2,000+ point character with limited life goals.

Super-bullies tend toward a strong sense of personal entitlement and poorly controlled emotions. They often need external support, both emotionally and logistically, to maintain their conquest. Bad Temper, Berserk, Greed, Impulsiveness, Jealousy, Manic-Depressive, Overconfidence, and Selfish are all common disadvantages. Oddly enough, Megalomania isn't common, because the super-bully lacks the drive for great things; Bloodlust is also rare because dead people can't be bullied anymore (though a few killings might be

required to get everyone else properly afraid). Super-bullies prefer people who are Chummy, keeping around a circle of sycophants and henchmen to boost their spirits.

Gene-Eerator

508 points

Eugene Beaumont was an underappreciated guy in a small, isolated town. He felt put upon and was unable to keep a steady job as his debts got away from him. He turned to crime to catch up on bills. He was caught driving out of state to rob stores and spent five years in a federal penitentiary for armed robbery. When he was released, he took a job as a goon for Lord Volt, a big-time villain who had employed some of his old cellmates. A fight with some supers went poorly, there was an accident, and Gene woke up under the rubble with electrical powers. He decided he was sick of petty crime and sick of working as a henchman; he just wanted to go home. And, with his powers, he should be able to get some respect this time!

Gene hired a few of his ex-con buddies as additional muscle and returned to his home town, using his powers to absorb all the broadcast transmissions out of the area. With a few well-placed lightning bolts, he scattered the local police and made sure everyone knew that he could have killed them. He could kill *all* of them, but he doesn't want that. He just wants some respect! And some beer. Oh, and he and his gang need some dates for Friday night. Gene is the superhuman equivalent of a motorcycle gang leader in a town where anyone who has stood up to him has paid the price. Fear runs rampant, and since Gene and his buddies haven't asked for too much, it's not worth the risk trying to bring in some super-help. Not yet.

Gene's likely able to pull this off for some time. The longer it works, the more likely he is to try it again somewhere else if this town successfully runs him out.

Gene has a limited ability to control electricity and short wavelength radiation in his immediate vicinity, but a decent ability to sense, generate, and direct it. He can feel power flows around him with concentration, but he automatically senses radio transmissions in his general area and can shut them down if he chooses (the Unreliable aspect of this power indicates how he doesn't really listen to everything). His primary offensive weapon is his lightning bolt, which he can aim by building up a positive charge around the target before launching his own negative one, making it very hard to dodge. He can shoot people directly, fork his lightning blast to hit multiple people, and shatter targets to produce fragmentary shrapnel. Gene's secondary attack is his "radiovision," an optic-based microwave stream that will invisibly cook his target. He'll alternate between the attack types to keep the populace afraid, but he can easily use them simultaneously in a major fight. His electrical powers have a lot of potential, but he is brutally direct and unsophisticated in their use.

ST 12 [20]; **DX** 14 [76]*; **IQ** 10 [0]; **HT** 11 [10].

Damage 1d-1/1d+2; BL 29 lbs.; HP 12 [0]; Will 10 [0]; Per 13 [15]; FP 11 [0].

Basic Speed 6.25 [0]; Basic Move 6 [0]; Dodge 14†‡.

Campaign idea: Because of global laws, no one with detectable super abilities is legally able to profit off them. This would explain the existence of lack of patents from mad scientists.

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Combat Reflexes [15]; Extra Attack 1 (Super, -10%) [23]; Very Fit (Super, -10%) [14].

Perks: Generator; Illumination. [2]

Electro-radio Powers (Psionic, Elemental; Talent 2 [10])

- *Electromanipulation*: Control Electricity 2 (Elemental, -10%; Persistent, +40%; Super, -10%) [48]

- *Electrified Skin*: Affliction 4 (Aura, +80%; Elemental, -10%; Melee Attack, Reach C, -30%; Super, -10%;) [52].

- *Field Sense*: Detect Electricity (Occasional; Elemental, -10%; Super, -10%) [8].

- *Lightning Bolt*: Burning Attack 8d (Elemental, -10%; Super, -10%; Increased 1/2D Range Only $\times 10$, +15%; Nuisance Effect, Thunderclap, -5%; Side Effect, Stunning, +50%; Surge, +20%) [64]. + *Forked Lightning*: Burning Attack 8d (Alternate Attack, $\times 1/5$; Elemental, -10%; Super, -10%; Nuisance Effect, Thunderclap, -5%; Rapid Fire RoF 1×3 , +50%; Surge, +20%) [13]. + *Shatterbolt*: Burning Attack 6d [3d] (Alternate Attack, $\times 1/5$; Elemental, -10%; Fragmentation, +45%; Nuisance Effect, Thunderclap, -5%; Super, -10%; Surge, +20%) [12].

- *Radio Listen*: Telecommunication (Radio; Elemental, -10%; Super, -10%; Unreliable, 11 or less, -20%) [6].

- *Radio Sense*: Detect Radio and Radar (Occasional; Elemental -10%; Precise +100%; Reduced Time 1, +20%; Signal Detection, +0%; Super, -10%) [20].

- *Radio Static*: Obscure Radio 10 (Area Effect, 8 yards, +150%; Elemental, -10%; Ranged, +50%; Super, -10%) [56].

- *Radio Vision*: Toxic Attack 3d (Elemental, -10%; Low Signature, Eyes glow, +10%; Super, -10%) [11].

- *Static Shield*: Enhanced Dodge 4 (Elemental, -10%; Super, -10%) [48].

Disadvantages

Bully (9) [-15]; Impulsiveness (12) [-10]; Overconfidence (9) [-7].

Quirks: Craves validation from old schoolmates; Prefers cheap beer; Badly scarred back. [-3]

Skills

Area Knowledge (Home Town) (E) IQ [1]-10; Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-15; Carpentry (E) IQ [1]-10; Electronics Repair/TL8 (Computers) (A) IQ [2]-10; Guns/TL8 (Pistol) (E) DX [1]-14; Innate Attack (Beam) (E) DX+3 [8]-17; Innate Attack (Gaze) (E) DX+1 [2]-15; Intimidation (A) Will [2]-10; Knife (E) DX [1]-14.

* Two levels of DX are Super, -10%.

† Includes +1 from Combat Reflexes.

‡ Includes +4 from Static Shield power.

WELL-INTENTIONED CONQUEROR

The well-intentioned conqueror is actually trying to do good, and his goal might be something the heroes agree with. This goal could be setting up a state for his “kind” (mutants, Atlanteans, a persecuted religious minority); bringing order to a failed state; or restoring (i.e. replacing) the government of a conquered one. Nonetheless, the heroes can come into conflict with the conqueror for a variety of reasons.

*I don't want the world;
I just want your half.*
– *They Might Be Giants*

The PCs might object on moral grounds; for example, a state for Atlanteans is a fine idea, but not if it means killing every non-Atlantean in the Caribbean. Or, the heroes might find they conflict with the “villain” for geopolitical reasons: Large countries support bad leaders in small countries for various reasons, and the PCs could be forced to defend one against a conqueror.

Perhaps the objection is humanitarian; conquering Tibet to free it might sound good, but the Chinese response could devastate the region. The heroes could even oppose the person for ideological reasons (say, the heroes philosophically oppose the conqueror's government).

If the well-intentioned conqueror thinks the heroes understand his concerns, he can be reasoned with. However, unless he's presented with a suitable alternative, he'll be hard to convince.

Building a Well-Intentioned Conqueror in GURPS

The psyche of the well-intentioned conqueror relies on a Sense of Duty. They also tend to be more powerful than the super-bully, but most of those extra points are tied up in Charisma, a higher IQ, and greater support structure. Unlike the super-bully, they don't *have* to be the strongest person in the room. Nonetheless, well-intentioned conquerors are potent enough to take on entire super-teams. They might take a cue from their mastermind brethren by having an array of allies to keep the heroes at bay while keeping his hands clean. Generally this means a 650-point character minimum, so he's a match for a single Legendary or low-end Superhuman hero while having extra points for his conqueror skills.

Genre rule: The villains with the most extraordinary abilities are also often the most unstable or have the most flaws.

Outside of the Sense of Duty, well-intentioned conquerors have an array of other possible disadvantages. They often have Stubbornness or a Code of Honor. They may follow Disciplines of Faith or have a Vow or Obsession. Many have a touch of Megalomania. They commonly have Workaholic. If they're working on behalf of a minority, they likely share that Social Stigma and perhaps an Intolerance for people who *aren't* in that group. While they have solid control of their emotions, it's not uncommon for them to be a little Callous or have some Bloodlust. The trick to a good well-intentioned conqueror is that you should be able to flip the narrative and see him as the hero. His presence is meant to spark a moral dilemma in the adventure.



Roulette

737 points

The man known as Roulette spent his youth as a child soldier in one of Africa's wars, called upon from age eight to perform acts of unthinkable brutality. Roulette had an edge: constant, accurate psionic precognition a minute into the future. Able to predict the path of every bullet and the tactics of every foe, he was a super-soldier, but he was unable to see far enough ahead to predict a way out. At age 16, he finally escaped with a cache of diamonds. He fled to Monaco, where he cleaned up both physically and metaphorically, adopting a cultured appearance and turning his stake into a fortune at his eponymous game of chance.

Roulette has one goal: to create a safe haven for psis (psionic individuals) apart from humans. For the moment, that is his luxury liner/casino, the *Prophetess*, where his reputation as a high-stakes gambler draws in operating funds, and international waters afford a modicum of protection. He plans to take over a failed state on his native continent with a small force of psis, ultimately using its territory and resources to make a psi homeland. Surely the humans in that conquered

nation will appreciate the security that he'll bring; if they don't, they'll be no worse under him than whatever warlords he might overthrow. And if this plan doesn't work, Roulette will try another country.

Unfortunately for Roulette, a psionic nation upsets the balance of power. Many psi-phobes, citizens, and leaders are comfortable accepting a failed-state humanitarian crisis over a non-human nation. Non-psi heroes might be counted on to intervene when he acts. The other problem with Roulette's plan is that he really doesn't care about humans; he's spent since childhood being ordered to slaughter them, so he doesn't ascribe much value to their lives. He won't kill them indiscriminately, but he won't *not* kill them either. If a non-psi threatens him, his people, or his plans, he'll kill them; it's that simple. This is equally likely to get heroes against him.

Roulette has a small force of psis working with him. Most important is Forte, a young woman with a pair of invisible telekinetic arms. She plays four-handed piano on the *Prophetess* as a parlor trick, but her TK arms can bend steel, reach through walls, block bullets, and aim with preternatural accuracy. She's not a bad shot with her regular arms, either. Forte is always covering Roulette's back.

Roulette works best if psis are a common origin and at least some of the heroes are psis. If so, the best way to introduce Roulette is as an NPC ally on a psi-centered mission. This way, the heroes will be conflicted when they face him later. Roulette, for his part, will always be available to help them against human adversaries; he sees their shared bond as being all-important, even if they don't.

In addition to his combat ability, Roulette is also amazingly charming and seductive, being able to see exactly which arguments will work (at least in the short term). The GM should be careful to give Roulette every conceivable advantage from his Precognition, as he has a constant, non-fatiguing view of the next minute with 90% accuracy, while his other advantages cover some combat and social implications, the full effect of the power is hard to measure.

ST 13 [30]; **DX** 20* [100]; **IQ** 15 [100]; **HT** 14 [40].

Damage 1d/2d-1; BL 34 lbs.; HP 13 [0]; Will 15 [0]; Per 15 [0]; FP 14 [0].

Basic Speed 8.5 [0]; Basic Move 8 [0]; Dodge 12†.

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].

CF: African [0].

Languages: An African Language (Native) [0]; English (Native) [6].

Advantages

Ambidexterity [5]; Appearance (Attractive) [4]; Charisma 1 [5]; Combat Reflexes [15]; Fit [5]; Less Sleep 1 [2]; Reputation, +2 (International playboy and high stakes gambler; Large group) [5]; Status 1 [0]‡; Wealth (Filthy Rich) [50].

Perks: Deep Sleeper. [1]

Genre rule: Repairs to downtown in a supers world take about 1/100th the time they would take in the real one.

Precognition Powers (Psionic; Talent 3 [15])

● *Precognition* (Accessibility, 1 minute maximum, -30%; One Event, Self only, -40%; Psionic, -10%; Reduced Fatigue Cost 2, 0 FP, +40%; Reduced Time 10, Instantaneous, +200%) [65].

- *Precognitive Attack*: Extra Attack 1 (Psionic, -10%) [23].
- *Precognitive Dodge*: Enhanced Dodge 3 (Psionic, -10%) [41].

● *Precognitive Gunplay*: Gunslinger (Psionic, -10%) [23].

● *Precognitive Luck*: Extraordinary Luck (Psionic, -10%) [27].

- *Precognitive Kinesthetics*: DX+5 (Psionic, -10%) [90].
- *Precognitive Risk-Taking*: Daredevil 1 (Psionic, -10%) [14].
- *Precognitive Targeting*: Enhanced Tracking 1 (Psionic, -10%) [5].

- *Smooth Operator* 3 (Psionic, -10%) [41].

● *Spatial-Temporal Awareness*: Scanning Sense (Imaging Radar; No Intercept, +50%; Psionic, -10%) [28].

Disadvantages

Bloodlust (12) [-10]; Obsession (12) (To found psi homeland) [-10]; Sense of Duty (All psis) [-10]; Social Stigma (Minority, Psis) [-10]; Workaholic [-5]

Quirks: Always wears red and black; Attracted to normal woman but thinks he should only be interested in Psis; Loves the company of young psis; Nightmares of childhood; Treats people ages 14+ as totally adult. [-5]

Skills

Diplomacy (H) IQ+1 [1]-16§; Finance (H) IQ-1 [2]-14; Politics (A) IQ+2 [1]-17§; Propaganda/TL8 (A) IQ-1 [1]-14.

Wildcard Skills: Commando! IQ-1 [12]-14; Fist! DX-2 [6]-18; Gun! DX-1 [12]-19; Playboy! IQ-1 [12]-14 (17§).

* Includes +5 from Precognitive Kinesthetics power.

† Includes +1 from Combat Reflexes.

‡ One level free from Wealth.

§ Includes +3 from Smooth Operator.

THE DRIVEN CONQUEROR

The conqueror is trying to take over somewhere because he just can't help himself. It might be a biological need to control territory. His powers might require an emotional or magical resource found only in a certain location. He could love his country so much he feels only he is fit to rule (in the way many normal dictators could be so defined). Since the desire for conquest is an unalterable part of them, the driven conqueror's defining point is that he can't be bargained with. No amount of discussion or negative reinforcement will make him change his plans or step down from power. If he isn't confined to a particular place, it might appear that negotiations worked, but it's only temporary; the conqueror has already begun planning to move somewhere else and try again. A driven conqueror *can* make a good ruler for a while, but one who starts well will usually develop an autocratic streak that worsens as the subjects start asking why he should remain in charge.

Building a Driven Conqueror in GURPS

Constructing a driven conqueror revolves around the source of the conquerors drive. If it's psychological, the driven conqueror is often no more personally potent than his well-intentioned counterpart (650 or more points). If it's biological or mystical, the conqueror is usually much tougher, typically equaling the Archetype template at 2,000+ points. A psychologically driven conqueror doesn't necessarily have to be the strongest guy in the room, but if not, he must control that guy. A biologically or mystically driven one is often the strongest person in the country, if not the hemisphere.

The key to driven conquerors is that they feel they has no choice in what they do. For psychological ones, this means some combination of Obsession, Fanaticism, or Vow, along with Megalomania. They often have oversized personalities – with Bad Temper, Compulsive Behavior, and Impulsiveness being common – and are often hard to persuade, being Hidebound and having Stubbornness. Driven conquerors have a common personality arc, starting with a Code of Honor, Overconfidence, and Sense of Duty that is eventually replaced with Bully, Greed, Jealousy, Paranoia, and Sadism.

Mystically driven conquerors often have a Destiny or Divine Curse in addition to the limitations of their psychologically driven brethren. Biologically driven conquerors have requirements that force them to act, perhaps a Dependency on conquest or Uncontrollable Appetite for the emotions of submission. In both cases, designing their powers with a Vow-as-Limitation “must control territory” is an interesting option, tying their powers to their conquest. Alternately, the act of conquest could be an Addiction. In any event, it must be clear that the driven conqueror can't stop.

Insectus Kahn

1,850 points

Insectus Kahn originated from Andromeda as a loser in a battle for the Queen's favor. Rather than accepting the loser's ritual position (“the main course”), Kahn fled the Hive Imperium, crashing in India in 1900. Grievously injured, he availed himself of the first passerby's body and memories. This man – an Indian Sergeant in the British army – was the only person on Earth to see the alien in his native form. After his torpor ended, the now vaguely humanoid alien styled himself Lord Insectus Kahn.

The warlord caste of the Hive Imperium has a biological imperative to control both territory and drones, so Kahn moved into the India/Afghanistan borderlands and carved himself out a small kingdom. When he awoke from his second torpor he discovered that his kingdom had fallen. After a brief battle avenging himself on those who failed him (leaving 489 dead), he left in disgust. This method has been constant for his career. First he conquers a low-tech area as a god-king. Next he wages blood sports for amusement, eats those under his command, and generally acts the worst form of tyrant. This lasts through one or two torpors, but with no allies to take the reins when he is incapacitated, he inevitably loses control, grows disgusted, and finally moves on.

To maintain a comic-book atmosphere, try to give each adventure a title. If there's an artist in the group, ask that person to come up with a “cover” for that week's issue.

His second “kingdom” was a modest one over some Bedouin tribes, disrupted as it was by the armies rampaging across North Africa in the 1940s. This included the first encounter between Kahn and Terran supers – in this case, the Arab “Desert Djinn” and Lady Elizabeth Greystoke. Kahn sorely outmatched them in terms of power but they still defeated him. This taught him valuable lessons about super-tenacity, and he has done his best to avoid such conflicts ever since.

He has not always been successful; in fact, he has *never* been successful. His lifestyle choices always lead to supers butting in. He has set up kingdoms on every continent except Antarctica but always runs into heroes eventually. At this point he’s ready to wipe them all out . . . which he believes an intriguing proposition, but one that would take a lot of work.

Insectus Kahn is powerful, but most of that power is in short-range abilities. His multi-faceted eyes can see into the ultraviolet spectrum in a 180° arc. His sense of smell via his antennae is vastly better than the human version, sufficient to discern fear or lies, as well as providing tracking and detection bonuses. His race’s endurance and reflexes are all well superior to human maximum. His body has chitinous armor tough enough to resist a shotgun shell. He has wings, but he seldom uses them since they take several seconds to molt from their casings and his flight is clumsy. His pheromones are his most versatile innate power; he can inject people with a mind-control chemical that can last for days (Kahn habitually surrounds himself with “drones”). He can release a pheromone cloud that gives him phenomenal persuasive abilities. He can exude pheromones with a 10-yard range that summon swarms of insects within seconds, filling the area with an obscuring, stinging cloud. He can bite and inject opponents with paralyzing venom.

Every decade, Kahn falls into torpor for three years, molting his old skin and growing a new one. In addition, if he is badly damaged, he must enter torpor within the next month or he dies. This is a biological imperative for his race, outside his control. If Kahn paralyzes someone with his venom, he can insinuate himself into the target’s body. They enter torpor together. When Kahn awakens, he has the victim’s physical type, memories, and skills, while keeping his own abilities. This is how he adopted an Earth form. No one knows what would happen if he used this on a superhuman target.

Several years ago, Kahn was defeated and nearly killed by the South Seas hero team Southern Cross. Kahn took control of an isolated tech company as a base for rebuilding his body with cybernetics while in torpor. These enhancements give him cybernetic strength enhancement, wireless computer hookups with invasive programming systems, and a holographic image generator that lets him take on the appearance of a handsome green-eyed Indian man. It is unclear what will happen to these cybernetics in his next torpor.

Finally, there is the Eye of the Locust: an 18”-diameter crystal orb that is a powerful weapon from Kahn’s home world. He controls it psychically at a range of one mile. The Eye operates independently as an ally and has considerable kinetic abilities,

including flight, telekinesis, and a focused energy blast that can penetrate plate armor. Kahn can see and hear through the Eye, letting him use it as a spy. The orb can see normal and UV light and can hear both conventional sounds and radio transmissions.

Kahn is incredibly powerful and can stand toe to toe with experienced super teams. He will control troops via fear, promises of power, or his venom. PCs might stumble across him (or a refugee from his empire) almost anywhere in the world; it is not inconceivable that he could take over a small rural North American community just down the road from our heroes’ city. Kahn can be a great change of pace because of his quirks; he has no legal right to rule and never controls very much, so there are no political qualms about invasion . . . it’s just clean four-color fun. At the end of the day, he’s just a big tough guy with a lot of goons for the heroes to fight.

ST 29/90* [100]; **DX** 23† [265]; **IQ** 14 [80]; **HT** 22 [120].

Damage 3d/5d+2, 10d/12d; BL 168 lbs./1,620 lbs.; HP 29* [0];

Will 14 [0]; Per 14 [0]; FP 22 [0].

Basic Speed 11.25 [0]; Basic Move 11 [0]; Dodge 14.

Social Background

TL: 10 [10].

CF: Andromeda [0]; India [2].

Languages: Andromeda Hive language [0]; Hindi (Native) [6]; English (Native) [6].

Advantages

Acute Taste and Smell 3 [6]; Ally (Eye of the Lotus; 100% point total; Minion, +50%; Constant) [30]; Claws (Talons; Switchable +10%) [9]; Clinging [20]; Damage Resistance 16 [80]; Discriminatory Smell (Emotion Sense, +50%) [23]; Doesn’t Eat or Drink (Accessibility, Only while in torpor, -30%) [7]; Enhanced Time Sense [45]; Flight (Costs Fatigue 3, -15%; Takes Extra Time 2, -20%; Winged, -25%) [16]; Less Sleep 4 [8]; Longevity [2]; Peripheral Vision [15]; Regrowth (Accessibility, Only while in torpor, -30%; Cosmic, Can absorb victim to aid recovery, +50%) [48]; Supernatural Durability [150]; Teeth (Sharp Teeth) [1]; Unkillable 1 [50]; Ultravision [10].

Pheromone Power (Biological with no added Fatigue cost; Talent 1 [5])

- *Obscuring, Stinging Insect Swarm*: Obscure Sight 5 and Obscure Hearing 3 and Obscure Touch 2 (All have: Area Effect, 8 yards, +150%; Accessibility, Insects nearby, -10%; Biological, -5%; Defensive, +50%; Delay, Fixed, 3 seconds, +0%; Homing, Detect, All life, +80%; Link, To Small Piercing Attack, +10%; Ranged, +50%) [86] + Small Piercing Attack 2d (Accessibility, Insects nearby, -10%; Area Effect, 16 yards, +200%; Biological, -5%; Bombardment, Skill 14, -5%; Delay, Fixed, 3 seconds, +0%; Homing, Detect, All life, +80%; Link, To Obscure Senses advantages, +10%; Persistent, +40%; Ranged, +50%) [28].

- *Pheromone Cloud*: Mind Control (Area Effect, 2 yards, +50%; Biological, -5%; Emanation, -20%; Independent, +70%; Scent Based, -20%; Suggestion, -40%) [68].

Unusual idea: The Sharers. All characters are created as normal (competent) heroes, and the GM creates a package of powers. Each PC can rely on any powers in the package, but if two PCs try to access the same power, it doesn’t work for either person.

In despair, there are the most intense enjoyments, especially when one is very acutely conscious of the hopelessness of one's position.

– *Fyodor Dostoevsky*

- *Venom Injection*: Affliction 3 (Biological, -5%; Coma, +250%; Follow Up, On teeth, +0%; Limited Use 1, -40%) [92].
- *Venom Spittle*: Mind Control (Based on HT, +20%; Biological, -5%; Blood Agent, -40%; Extended Duration ×1,000, +120%; Independent, +70%; Limited Use 4, -20%; Onset, 1 minute, -10%) [118].

Cybernetics Power (Electronic; Talent 1 [5])

- *Computer Uplinks*: Mind Reading (Cybernetic, +50% Cybernetic Only, -50%; Electronic, -30%) [21].
- *Imbedded Exoskeleton*: ST+9/+70 (Electronic, -30%; Super-Effort, +300%) [333].
- *Invasive Programming*: Mind Control (Cybernetic, +50% Cybernetic Only, -50%; Electronic, -30%;) [35].
- *Shapeshifting*: Alternate Form (Cosmetic, -50%; Electronic, -30%) [3].

Disadvantages

Appearance (Hideous) [-16]; Bloodlust (12) [-10]; Callous [-5]; Enemies (Various superheroes; Hunter; 6 or less) [-15]; Megalomania [-10]; Obsession (6) (Biological imperative to control territory and drones) [20]; Terminally Ill (Must enter torpor and regenerate every 10 years) [0].

Quirks: Distinctive Features (Insect-like). [-1]

Skills

Guns/TL8 (Rifle) (E) DX [1]-23; Escape (H) DX [4]-23; Karate (H) DX+2 [12]-25; Stealth (A) DX-1 [1]-22.

Wildcard Skills: Scholar! IQ-1 [12]-13; Science! IQ-3 [3]-11; Spacer! IQ-2 [6]-12.

* Includes +9/+70 from Imbedded Exoskeleton power.

† Includes one level with Super Attribute, +25%.

The Eye of the Lotus

1,167 points

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 20 [120]*; **IQ** 10 [0]; **HT** 20 [100].

Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 34 lbs.; HP 20 [20]; Will 10 [0]; Per 10 [0]; FP 0 [0]†.

Basic Speed 10.00 [0]; Basic Move 10 [0]; Dodge 13.

Advantages

360-Degree Vision [25]; Crushing Attack 12d (Armor Divisor 10, +200%; Increased Range ×5, +20%) [192]; Crushing Attack 12d (Alternate Attack, ×1/5; Cone 5, +100%) [24]; Damage Resistance 100 [500]; Digital Mind [5]; Doesn't Breathe [20]; Enhanced Move 5 (Air) [100]; Flight [40]; Machine [25]; Telecommunication (Telesend; Racial, Hive Imperium, -20%;

Video, +40%) [36]; Telekinesis 12 [60]; Ultravision [10]; Unaging [15].

Perk: No Visible Damage [1].

Disadvantages

Cannot Speak [-25]; Duty (Serve agents of the Hive Imperium; Extremely Hazardous; Involuntary; 15 or less) [-25]; No Legs (Aerial) [0]; No Manipulators [-50]; Reprogrammable [-10]; Truthfulness (6) [-10]; Wealth (Dead Broke) [-25].

Skills

Flight (A) HT+4 [16]-24; Innate Attack (Beam) (E) DX [1]-20; Observation (A) Per [2]-10.

* Cost reduced for No Manipulators, -40%.

† From Machine meta-trait.

THE DESPERATE LEADER

This conqueror is the leader of a group of people, usually stateless, who feel they must have their own homeland. The important distinction with the other types of conquerors is that the desperate leader isn't looking to take control of a group of people; he *has* a group of people, but what he needs is somewhere to put them. Conquest looks like the only viable method. The desperate leader has to think not only about his goals but his charges; sometimes he'll rationalize that a plan with the options of victory or death, if it goes wrong, won't leave his people worse off . . . and if his people face certain death if he fails, he could be right! The GM should think out why the desperate leader can't try something other than conquest; is there a reason why resettlement won't work, for example? If pushed, the desperate leader might also be a driven conqueror who can't imagine not being the one to lead his people to their new homeland.

Building a Desperate Leader in GURPS

While some of the other conquerors might have a Sense of Duty, the desperate leader has an actual Duty, and a full-time, hazardous one at that. Logically the desperate leader could be of any power level (adjusted to account for control of their people's resources), although in the comics the desperate leader is usually incredibly powerful. This not only allows for some straight-up fights, it makes him the embodiment of his people, just as planetary governors in space opera condense complex levers of government into a single personal relationship. Therefore 1,500-2,000 points is usually the floor for the desperate leader. It's perhaps best to start with the Archetype template and layer things on from there.

Genre rule: Even in a city full of heroes, any given situation that a group of PCs stumbles across can only be resolved by them.

The desperate leader could have any number of advantages or disadvantages based on his origins. If he wrested control in a crisis he could have a Bad Temper and/or be a Selfish, Impulsive Megalomaniac. If he was duly elected he is likely a Stubborn Workaholic; if his position isn't secure, he might have Paranoia. If he represents his people's most traditional side they might be Hidebound, while if they gained control by promising radical solutions they could be Overconfident. One overriding factor of desperate leaders is that, while they are desperate, they are also confident; they were made absolute rulers in perilous times, and that doesn't happen by being indecisive. Plus, a desperate leader's resistance to ideas not his own means the heroes can't solve the problem with five minutes of talk; they have to hit the mule over the head first to get his attention.

Señor Q

Millennia ago the great Mesoamerican culture of the Toltecs abandoned this realm for another one, using their vast magical power to create a pocket dimension where they might explore the greater universe. Unfortunately, something destroyed much of their higher magic. Still, the Toltecs made do, carving out a decent life in a limited world.

Now the spells that sustain them are collapsing and their world is literally crumbling. They see no choice but to restore themselves to Earth. This will mean overwriting what is currently in those places, but it's such a small space – stretching from Mexico City to Los Angeles, California – that it's likely no one will notice. The process will start slow, first invading the dreams of current inhabitants, then filtering in Toltec architecture and culture. Eventually the process will be complete and the Toltec people will be safe, replacing everything and everyone that once stood there.

The Toltec leader is in the world already. Señor Q (a name given by the media) is a broad shouldered, barrel-chested man with the features of Central America's indigenous peoples. A former military man and arcane scholar, he was elected the leader of his people based on their faith that he could save them. Once elected he was bound to one of the great Feathered Serpents, a process that stripped him of his afterlife; he has literally given up Heaven, so he will not be easily dissuaded. He is superhumanly strong and durable, capable of broad magical effects, and can transform into his Quetzalcoatl shape with a moment's notice. He is also as intelligent and charismatic as one might expect from the person elected to save his entire world.

The difficulty of course, is that his plan is an isolationist nightmare: Mesoamericans overwriting southern California with their own culture, replacing all Americans in the process? Despite swaths of Mexico also being at risk (including one of the world's largest cities), the two countries will find it hard to work together to resist the Toltecs yet impossible to negotiate with them – not that Señor Q is open to negotiations. Even if the heroes drive him off once, Señor Q will return and try again and again as his people literally have nothing to lose. The big challenge is finding a different way to solve the Toltec's problem.

Señor Q is facing problems at home, which just makes him more desperate. His political opposition created their own supernatural leader, bonding one of their elite with an amphibian spirit. This "Frog Prince" also moves back and forth between our world and the Toltec's dimension, looking to undermine Señor Q and institute the opposition's plan. Heroes might think that the Frog Prince is on their side; unfortunately, if Señor Q is killed the Frog Prince will take over the Toltecs with the aim of unleashing a magical plague that will wipe out half the Earth's population and devour all advanced technology, giving the Toltec empire room to expand.

Señor Q is a great menace for any supers team on the west coast of the United States. He's powerful and subtle, able to take on the hero team in a fight and reliably escape. He'll have different plans, but always the same goal, so he could be a conqueror version of Mr. Mxyzptlk, returning every 90 days. The Toltec problem could be the story arc for the entire campaign, with the heroes working as hard as Señor Q to solve the Toltec's problem. Alternatively, the GM could introduce it as a "four-issue arc" where the heroes get deeply involved and bring it to a speedy conclusion, perhaps earning a powerful ally in the process. The Toltec invasion plan lends itself to a team with some supernatural heroes, as those are the ones best able to sense the invasion coming.

No **GURPS** character information is provided about Señor Q because he works best as a plot device and moral dilemma than as a direct enemy to fight.

STOPPING A CONQUEROR

Heroes may have one of several reasons to try to stop any conqueror, small time or no. Even if their government tells them not to, many adventurers might decide that since the conqueror is a super it's their duty to get involved; their shared power level gives them license to act even if their home government doesn't. However messy the GM wants to make cleaning up after a conqueror depends on the game's tone. In a four-color setting the United Nations/State Department/Egalitarian Resistance Cells seamlessly handle a return to normality. In a grittier one, the heroes might have been better off listening to the naysayers.

BECOMING A CONQUEROR

For campaigns wanting a change of pace, the PCs might become the de facto rulers of a country rescued from a small-time conqueror; this is a great way to transition the standard status-quo supers game to one where heroes start altering the world. The small location keeps things from spiraling too fast, so if the experiment doesn't work the GM can transition the game back. And if it is popular with the group, the heroes should now know how to use a small conquest to hold down resistance, project their power, and deal with logistical difficulties. Perhaps taking over the world wouldn't be so hard after all . . .

If super-powers occur in one in every 100,000 people, here are approximate numbers for the top 10 major metropolitan areas: Tokyo, 325 supers; Seoul, 206; Mexico City, 205; New York City, 198; Mumbai, 192; Jakarta, 189; Sao Paulo, 189; Keihanshin (Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto), 174; Shanghai, 167.

POWERS AS METAPHORS

BY BRIAN ROGERS

When building a supers campaign it makes sense to take a step back and look at what powers *mean* in a setting. This doesn't refer to what powers do (how much can Strong Man lift, how fast can Zipster run) but rather what they mean in a narrative sense and how the populace treats them. This varies by book, team, and even story arc.

Defining metaphors for powers can provide plot ideas and make your campaign setting feel distinctive.

THE HISTORICAL METAPHOR

Metaphors can be applied to the entire campaign or just to individual heroes and their home cities. The two best-known comic-book universes went in opposite directions here. The Marvel universe applied a single metaphor to their books: Powers were the Cold War. The Fantastic Four embodies the Kennedy administration: a cultured, intelligent head man; a beautiful helpmate; and an angry-yet-hopeful youth, supported by the rough ethnic who props them up even as he feels isolated. Iron Man is a walking Military Industrial Complex. The Hulk is the Army's A-bomb program: an unstoppable, barely controlled force of science. Captain America is patriotism at its best, untainted by Watergate or Vietnam. Villains are either obviously part of the Cold War (such as Titanium Man or the Mandarin) or implicitly so. (The Skrulls can look just like normal Americans, but they seek to conquer us! Doctor Doom rules over an Eastern European Stalinist dictatorship!) The strength of this metaphor added energy to early Marvel titles, making them felt relevant. As the country changed so did the tone and content of Marvel's comics; eventually the metaphor fell away.

At DC, the independent creation of its iconic heroes prevented the formation of the broader metaphor, so each book contains its own. In the Batman comics, wearing a costume is like insanity; Batman is obsessed and his enemies are clearly

around the bend. Metaphors at DC are often unevenly applied; some teams or iconic heroes revolve around them to make some powerful stories while others ignore them altogether. It's also possible for metaphors to be applied inconsistently: Sometimes Superman is an Immigrant; other times, he's not.

THE COMMON METAPHORS

There are several metaphors that are common in mainstream comic universes; they provide useful known building blocks for consideration.

Like Puberty: Supers manifest or gain powers in their second decade. The normal aspects of this time period are sudden physical changes, emotional highs and lows, and questions of identity and one's place in the world; all this combines into something that is both scary and exciting. Eventually characters learn how to control their powers just as they settle on their identity and place in the world, but they are forever changed as a result.

Like Race: If supers are born with their differences, then supers are a minority. Stories exploring this aspect revolve around issues of equality, proving that one is equal to members of the majority (in ways that the majority accepts), fear of the other, integration, and status. Powers equate to skin color or country of origin, and even when the majority acknowledges that a super is better in some areas they denigrate all supers in others (similar to racist views like "Blacks are good athletes but they lack the minds to be quarterbacks").

Like Sexual Orientation: With this metaphor, supers are apart from humanity but can hide their powers. It's still a minority status, but there's just no way to tell on the surface who's different. The Race options apply here as well, with divisions (and plenty of room for conflict) between supers who can hide their powers and those who can't. Secret IDs become as much a way to stay "in the closet" as to work in a world that hates you.

Notice that all three above examples apply to the X-Men: mutant powers appear in puberty, mutants are members of another race, and some mutants are able to hide their mutations. All three metaphors have been applied to the team over time, which has given the creators a lot of storytelling room.

As another way to help define the game world, decide if the following exist and to what extent: magic, luck, psionics, ghosts, aliens.

A Metaphor Is Just a Metaphor

A key thing to keep in mind during this process is that the metaphor isn't the reality of the setting; it's just a lens for storytelling purposes. Characters in a "being a super is like being a soldier" game shouldn't really be part of a military unit, because then it's no longer a metaphor. Likewise, if being a super is similar to being Jewish, it's not that all Jews are supers, but that all supers share some characteristics with the Jewish people; perhaps Atlanteans remember their culture's destruction, or extraterrestrials worry that maintaining their native holidays and celebrations will set them apart. The metaphor is meant as a jumping off point, not an absolute fact.

It's also important to note that the metaphor implies *some* similarities, not a one-to-one mapping. William Stoddard had pointed out that there's a roughly 5:1 villain-to-hero ratio in the comics, so there are enough villains to

give each hero a rogues' gallery. This should not imply that the GM thinks that 80% of all Jews (or soldiers, or minorities, or the disabled, or what have you) are criminals! If interbreeding between the extraterrestrial supers and humans is impossible, it might be mined for a story about the difficulties of romance between people of two different cultures, not as an argument for "racial purity." Sensitivity and tact are key here, as is the ability to occasionally shut the metaphor off when it doesn't improve the game.

Since this is an area where tact is required, it's a good idea to make sure that everyone is on the same page before rolling out the metaphor. If having powers is like having an alternate sexual identity, the play group should be able to agree what that means – not in an exhaustive level of detail, but enough that the ideas aren't going to cause friction around the table and diminish everyone's fun.

Like Parents: Powers are things you inherit (like blue eyes) or are family traditions. Supers must forge their own identity in the shadow of intimidating parents. As children, we see our parents as powerful, but what if your parents have saved the world? How do you live up to that sort of expectation? This works particularly well if the heroes are all sidekicks or empowered by their parents. Rather than thinking about the nature of prejudice, players work through the expectations of every parent/child relationship. This metaphor was explored exceptionally well in the 1980s run of *Teen Titans*.

Like Disabilities: Powers come from surviving horrible accidents, making normal people uncomfortable to be around you. This might involve actual physical limitations in addition to powers, or instead be societal limitations. Even when supers are looked up to, it is with a tinge of condescension: "Look how much he's managed to accomplish with all of his disadvantages!" Under this metaphor, no one hopes that they get powers. Obviously the *Doom Patrol* is the best example of this metaphor, where one hero is a brain trapped in a robot body and another is a radioactive person wrapped head to toe in bandages.

USING METAPHORS

So why define a metaphor for powers in your game world? There are several reasons. First, it makes the campaign feel distinctive. A game of 1950s superheroes will feel one way if the overarching metaphor is that Powers are like Atomic Horror, where non-conformity exiles supers from common society, which in turn leads to their inevitable deterioration; it will feel quite differently if Powers are like being Letterman Student-Athletes, lauded by society as stalwart team players. Both are emblematic of 1950s society, but Ward and June Cleaver's

reaction if Wally announces his empowerment is likely to be radically different. (How quickly would Eddie Haskell sell out an Atomic-Horror-empowered Wally Cleaver to the feds?)

Second, metaphors give the players places to hang character hooks. Those without ideas for their powers might find inspiration in the metaphor of, for example, parent/child dynamics: in the *Teen Titans*, Cyborg is a boy whose father wanted his son to be an engineer so badly he turned him into a machine, while Raven is the orphan who is repeatedly told that her father's evil is in her because she really is the daughter of the devil. The metaphor provides impetus for both an origin story and personality while still allowing each PC to be distinct.

Finally, a metaphor gives players and GMs ideas for both individual stories and story arcs. Working through the metaphor becomes a long-term campaign goal. If powers are like puberty, then many of the commonly used tropes of teen fiction can be duplicated with a twist for individual stories, even as the inevitable path to adulthood makes for a compelling campaign chronicle.

NEW AND FERTILE GROUND

So what are some metaphors *haven't* been used in widely read comics?

Like Being a Soldier: William Stoddard contemplated this in *GURPS Weird War II*. Powers are not gained by choice, but semi-randomly, like the draft, and supers must meet certain physical standards. Once you have them, you are bound by a different set of rules and obligations (military justice, chain of command) with a sense of camaraderie to the super-humans on "your team," who are likely a cross section of the nation, with all classes, religions, and ethnicities.

When creating characters, try to come up with power sets that can be explained as succinctly and evocatively as possible. Telling criminals, "I have the speed and cunning of a raven!" is better than saying, "I have flight, super-intellect, and enhanced vision."

Like Disconnectedness from Modern Society: Everyone hides who they *really* are. Individual (“vigilante”) action is a logical response when society doesn’t understand you. The disconnect grows with the power level, explaining why supers turn to villainy. If powers are more often held by teens, they could symbolize the generational disconnect, with adults incapable of understanding their children’s new world.

Like Being Jewish: If powers are inherited via a culture that suffered a Diaspora and Holocaust, they would face the concern of how much of culture can they give up in the name of fitting in. Do secret identities let them maintain their culture in private while keeping up appearances? Are there enclaves of the ultra-orthodox supers who disdain those who assimilate? Can a super who severs all ties to his native culture still be the “other”?

Like Being an Athlete: Emerging from a combination of gifts and training, powers mark out the super as being someone special, someone who is simultaneously expected to excel on their own and carry the expectations of their teammates and their fans/patrons, but in their high school, college alumni, or home city. Supers exist in a land of special breaks (grade minimum waivers to keep them playing), constant scrutiny, and fickle fame.

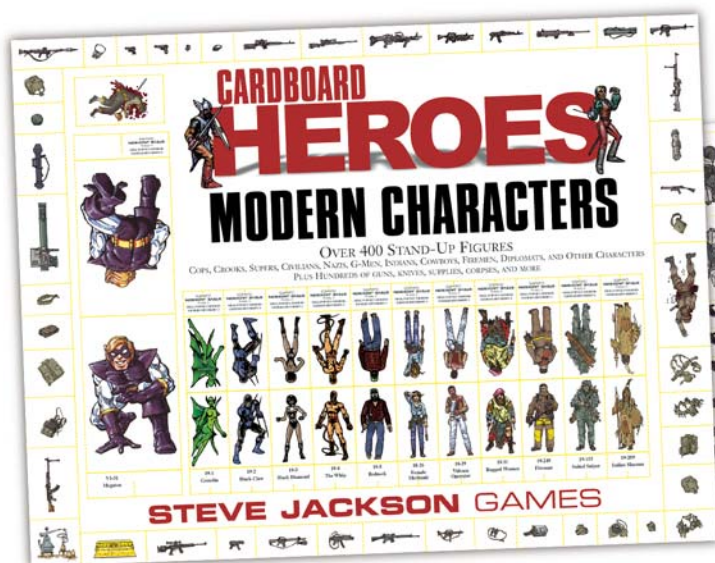
Like the 1970s Disco Scene: Extravagant behavior, booming noises, flashing lights, and colorful tight clothing overlap between disco and supers already. But what if supers are trapped in a conflict between their once-high ideals and narcissistic self-promotion, reveling in the elitism of who gets let into the scene? Perhaps those flashy super-conflicts are more to attract bedmates than they are about saving the world . . .

A FINAL WARNING

One trouble with powers as metaphors is that the metaphor can be mined out. This is a bigger problem in the comics where every month you need a new story. Like in some comics, the players and GM in a game can transition from one metaphor (such as Parents) to another (perhaps Race) once the heroes have all worked through their parental issues. Alternately, everyone can agree that the campaign is thematically over, move toward some sort of climax in the plot, and move on. In their next campaign they can try out a new metaphor; the group might pick up their favorite vampire-hunter game and explore how High School is like Hell.

To be nobody-but-myself – in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else – means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting.

– E. E. Cummings



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Ext-ree! Ext-ree! Read all about it!

In the props on the next pages, each newspaper front page contains three blank boxes: one for the date (top right, just below "Today's City Final • \$1.00"); one for the headline (spanning across a blank area and a picture); and one set for the start of the article (two columns under the headline area and next to the picture). The text size has been set up for you. Check out the picture below for details on box locations and how much text can fit in each box.

GMs can use each of the next three pages to as aids that contain clues to help adventures along, as props to suggest a new campaign, or as a means of recording events in the PCs' adventuring careers. Unless your software allows it, you won't be able to save the newspapers as electronic files, but you can print them out to keep for reference.

The last page of this section (p. 28) contains several examples of headlines (the article area is filled with nonsense text). Hopefully these will give you ideas for how the Daily Illuminator can be used in your campaign.

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Find out more about the latest sports scandals in Sports.



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DAILY ILLUMINATOR

A hero is a man who does what he can. – Romain Rolland

TODAY'S CITY FINAL • \$1.00

Insert Date here

Scientists Study Air

Press Collection

Scientists recently dropped hundreds of boxes of electronic surveillance equipment, attached to parachutes. They gathered information about the atmosphere, air quality, wind speed, and more.

>> See Weather, page A8



Headline here, a few words long, with longer words taking up more space.

Two columns of text, 140-160 words long, with longer words and more paragraphs causing there to be less space for words.

>> See Top Story, page A3



Inside . . .

Get our opinions on
local developments in
Opinions.



Find the best bargains on the
latest gear with our Shopping
guide.



Are there problems with a
sport's team new stadium?
Find out in Sports.



Can you imagine what I would do if I could do all I can? – Sun Tzu
TODAY'S CITY FINAL • \$1.00

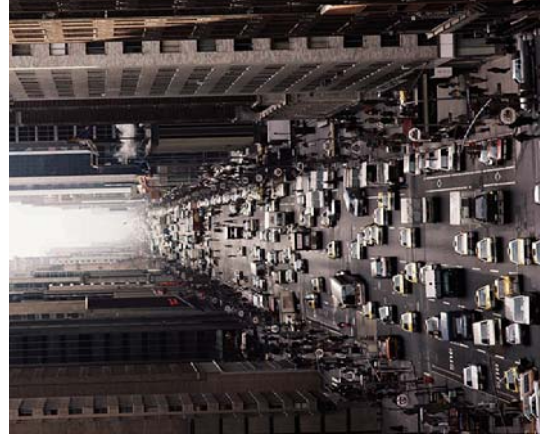
DAILY ILLUMINATOR

Congress in Gridlock

Press Collection

A message was received from the Senate, informing them that they were ready to receive the most recent communication from the President. Meanwhile, several senators presented new arguments against a recent proposed bill.

>> **See Gridlock, page A8**



>> **See Top Story, page A3**

Inside . . .

Our Shopping Guide shows you the best gear for this time of year.



Lucky local player makes it big. Get the details in Sports.



Staff editors and national writers critique hot topics in Opinions.



Aspire rather to be a hero than merely appear one. – Baltasar Gracian
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Economy Still in Flux

Press Collection

Economic analysts argued over the state of the economy. Some thought it was looking up, while others predicted a gloomy future. Other analysts are more cautious, saying it's too soon to say where the economy is going.

>> **See Economy, page A8**



>> **See Top Story, page A3**

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>> See Weather, page A8



>> See Top Story, page A3

SUPPORTING CAST

THE PLAYER KINGS

BY STEPHEN DEDMAN

The Player Kings are a notoriously theatrical supervillain team with a well-known modus operandi: While a few members of the team concentrate on a particular crime, the rest will stage extremely visible diversions around the town to distract the police and any superheroes. These diversions will sometimes be profitable in their own right (if not prevented), but they will almost always be destructive.

The leader of the Player Kings, Andronicus, was once a famed Shakespearean actor and director who specialized in playing villains on stage and screen. One day, a staged explosion went hideously wrong, and Lord William Murcott (as he was known) lost his left arm, most of his face and skull, and much of the skin of his torso in a fire. A weapons designer who was also a fan of his films created prosthetics and armor for him, enabling Andronicus to kill a team of lawyers he believed had cheated him. Andronicus and his armourer, Pistol, then abducted and ransomed a horse from the royal family's stables, using the money to create a refuge for themselves and make a donation to a historical preservation society. These spectacular crimes attracted other criminals with a flair for the dramatic, and soon Andronicus was leader (he prefers the term "director") of a major supervillain group.

Andronicus is careful to occasionally organize crimes that will be popular with the public and become urban legends, such as painting an eyesore of a building in camouflage patterns to make it less visible, or killing a distributor of unsolicited e-mail pornography and turning his corpse into canned meat. He also regularly donates much of the proceeds of any attack to charities – mostly theater trusts and drama scholarships, but also to medical research into prosthetics and bionics. He delights in sending recordings of himself to journalists warning them of crimes he's about to commit, ostensibly so that innocent bystanders can flee the area in time; inevitably, these crime scenes swarm with journalists, cops, and Andronicus' many fans. He ensures the loyalty of his troupe by attempting to rescue them from imprisonment when they're

arrested (which they frequently are), even if these jailbreaks also often serve as diversions for more profitable crimes. These public-relations stunts may fool some people into forgetting that he actually is (as he likes to say) "a remorseless, treacherous, kindless villain," who enjoys re-enacting the most gruesome scenes from his favorite Shakespearean plays and horror films using real blood and real corpses.

ANDRONICUS (LORD WILLIAM MURCOTT)

350 points

After Lord William Murcott's disfiguring accident, he spent the next few years in carefully controlled lighting with his head encased in a cast to protect his shattered skull. He recorded occasional voiceovers and audio plays, more to break the monotony than out of financial need. When the studio's insurance company escaped paying damages by pleading bankruptcy, however, he was enraged by the injustice and swore revenge. When Peter Holst, an armourer who was also a fan, modified experimental Land Warrior equipment for him, the first thing they did was to kill the lawyers (cheerfully quoting *Henry IV* as they went). Murcott discovered that crime was the perfect antidote for boredom; he adopted the name Andronicus and began plotting more heists.

Andronicus usually prefers to use charm and bluff rather than resort to violence, but he will not hesitate to kill anyone he regards as a threat or an enemy, often in spectacularly messy ways. He has little regard for those he considers his intellectual inferiors and is dangerously short-tempered.

Andronicus' usual means of transportation is an armored Rolls Royce with DR 40 (windows DR 15). Features include a burglar alarm, puncture-resistant tires, luxury fittings, 12 man-hours of limited life support, and multiple gun ports. Its top speed is 95 mph.

Unusual idea: The Unstable – Non-super characters are built on a modest number of points, as normal. Super abilities are then purchased using only disadvantage points; the power powerful a hero is, the more limited or hampered.

Murcott is unable to remove his helmet (apart from the lower half of the faceplate, which he leaves open when not in combat, revealing pale skin and a neatly trimmed black and gray beard). He only removes his armor and heavy left arm when in the safety of his hideout. His usual costume is a dark gray cloak over red and black half-plate, similar to one he wore as the ghost in *Hamlet*, but his stiff-armed, slightly lopsided gait owes more to *Richard III*.

ST 12 (14*) [20]; **DX** 12 [40]; **IQ** 13 [60]; **HT** 12 [20].
Damage 1d-1/1d+2; BL 29 lbs.; HP 12 [0]; Will 14 [5]; Per 13 [0]; FP 12 [0].
Basic Speed 6.00 [0]; Basic Move 6 [0]; Dodge 9, Block 9; Parry 9.
6'5"; 231 lbs. (including bionics).

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0]; French (Accented/None) [1]†; Greek (Accented/None) [1]†; Hindi (Accented/None) [1]†; Italian (Accented/None) [1]†; Japanese (Accented/None) [1]†; Latin (Accented/None) [1]†.

Advantages

Arm ST+2 (Left arm; Alternative Ability with Small Piercing Attack, ×1/5; Temporary Disadvantages, Electrical, -20%, and Maintenance, 1 person, weekly, -5%) [1]; Charisma 4 [20]; Claws (Talons; Alternative Attack with Large Piercing Attack, ×1/5) [2]; Damage Resistance 10 (Unremovable ballistic helmet; Skull Only, -70%) [15]; Eidetic Memory [5]; Language Talent [10]; Less Sleep 2 [4]; Luck [15]; Large Piercing Attack 3d pi+ (.44M revolver in left arm; Extra Recoil 4, -30%; Increased Range ×20, +40%; Limited Use, 10 uses with Fast Reload, 5%; Rapid Fire 3, +50%) [28]; Smooth Operator 2 [30]; Unfazeable [15]; Voice [10]; Wealth (Wealthy) [20].

Perks: Alcohol Tolerance; Off-Hand Weapon Training (Shortsword); Style Familiarity (Italian Fencing School). [3]

Disadvantages

Appearance (Ugly) [-8]; Bad Back (Mild) [-15]; Bad Temper (9) [-15]; Bloodlust (12) [-10]; Insomniac (Mild) [-10]; Intolerance (Philistines) [-5]; One Arm (Mitigator, -70%) [-6].

Quirks: Donates part of proceeds of any crime to a charity; Imaginative; Loves playing villains; Proud; Quotes Shakespeare and horror films. [-5]

Skills

Acting (A) IQ+4 [8]-17§; Area Knowledge (Europe) (E) IQ [1]-13; Brawling (E) DX [1]-12; Cloak (A) DX+1 [4]-13; Connoisseur (Literature) (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Connoisseur (Visual Arts) (A) IQ+1 [4]-14; Connoisseur (Wine) (A) IQ [2]-13; Cooking (A) IQ [2]-13; Criminology/TL8 (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Current Affairs/TL8 (High Culture) (E) IQ+1 [2]-14; Current Affairs/TL8 (Popular Culture) IQ [1]-13; Detect Lies (H) Per+1 [2]-14§; Diplomacy (H) IQ+3 [2]-16§¶; Driving/TL8 (Automobile) (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Expert Skill (Thanatology) (H)

IQ-2 [1]-11; Fast-Talk (A) IQ+3 [1]-16§¶; Games (Chess) (E) IQ+1 [2]-14; Group Performance (Directing) (A) IQ [2]-13; Guns/TL8 (Pistol) (E) DX+1 [2]-13; History (English) (H) IQ-2 [1]-11; Interrogation (A) IQ [2]-13; Intimidation (A) Will+2 [2]-16§; Knife (E) DX [1]-12; Leadership (A) IQ+5 [1]-18‡§; Literature (H) IQ [4]-13; Merchant (A) IQ [2]-13; Mimicry (Speech) (A) IQ+1 [2]-14¶; Observation (A) Per [2]-13; Occultism (A) IQ [2]-13; Performance (A) IQ+3 [2]-16¶; Persuade (H) Will [4]-14; Poisons/TL8 (H) IQ-1 [2]-12; Psychology (H) IQ [4]-13; Public Speaking (A) IQ+7 [1]-20‡§¶; Rapier (A) DX+1 [4]-13; Research/TL8 (A) IQ [2]-13; Riding (Horse) (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Savoir-Faire (High Society) (E) IQ+4 [1]-17§¶; Shield (Buckler) (E) DX [1]-12; Shortsword (A) DX [2]-12; Singing (E) HT+2 [1]-14¶; Stage Combat (A) DX [2]-12; Streetwise (A) IQ+2 [2]-15§; Suggest (H) Will-1 [2]-13; Traps/TL8 (A) IQ+1 [4]-14; Wrestling (A) DX-1 [1]-11.

Technique: Dual Weapon Attack (H) (Pistol)-1 [4]-12.

* For left arm only.

† Includes +1 from Language Talent.

‡ Includes +4 from Charisma.

§ Includes +2 from Smooth Operator.

¶ Includes +2 from Voice.

The Player Kings are a notoriously theatrical supervillain team with a well-known modus operandi: Team members create visible diversions for other crimes.

Gear

Auto pistol, 9mm; rapier; heavy cloak; TL9 ballistic suit with gloves; boots; armored limo.

PISTOL (PETER HOLST)

194 points

The son of a British soldier-turned-gunsmith, Peter Holst grew up surrounded by weapons and armor. Some of these were antique, some were used regularly for target shooting or on hunting expeditions, and some were illegal long before the British government banned handguns. His love of guns didn't even falter after his father accidentally shot him in the leg, permanently damaging it.

After failing both the physical and psychological tests to get into the Army, Holst was hired by his father as an apprentice, occasionally working as an armourer on movies filmed in Britain. After creating weapons for a science-fiction movie, he began inventing new guns and equipment for British armaments manufacturers. While most of his designs were too expensive to be practical, he did gain the respect of many other

In the real world, about one in 40 people is a twin (in other words, one in 80 births is a twin birth). In the comic world, this rate is much higher; usually, at least one twin is evil.

designers, along with a security clearance. He also tinkered with exoskeletons intended to compensate for his bad leg and lungs; when he heard of Murcott's injuries, he designed a suit for him as well. He soon became his partner in crime and began designing weapons and armor for other crooks who joined their gang.

Andronicus considers Holst too valuable to risk, an arrangement that Holst is secretly happy with. In any combat, he usually hangs back in safety, sometimes firing from a sniper nest or through a gun port in Andronicus' car. When he has to walk any distance, he carries a heavy cane concealing a silenced pistol (1 shot, armor-piercing and cyanide-tipped, 4d venom damage; range and damage as for TL7 Holdout pistol), and also serves as a light club.

Holst has a pale complexion, crewcut dark-gray hair, and hazel eyes.

ST 11 [10]; **DX** 12 [40]; **IQ** 13 [60]; **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-1/1d+1; BL 24 lbs.; HP 11 [0]; Will 12 [-5]; Per 13 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.50 [0]; Basic Move 3 [-10]; Dodge 8. 5'9"; 155 lbs. 52 years old.

Social Background

TL: 9 [5].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Ambidexterity [5]; Artificer 1 [10]; Gadgeteer (Realistic) [25]; Gizmos 1 [5]; Gunslinger [25]; High Manual Dexterity 1 [5]; Single-Minded [5]; Versatile [5].

Disadvantages

Berserk (12) [-10]; Bloodlust (9) [-15]; Code of Honor (Pirate's) [-5]; Curious (12) [-5]; Intolerance (Pacifists) [-5]; Jealousy (12) [-10]; Very Unfit [-15];

Quirks: Won't learn foreign languages; Collects weapons, military uniforms, and pipes; Donates 10% of his income to the gun lobby; Loves violent theater and movies; Stutters when he meets beautiful women. [-5]

Skills

Administration (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Armoury/TL9 (Body Armor) (A) IQ+1 [2]-14*; Armoury/TL9 (Melee Weapons) (A) IQ [1]-13*; Armoury/TL9 (Small Arms) (A) IQ+3 [8]-16*; Brawling (E) DX [1]-12; Broadsword (A) DX [2]-12; Computer Operation/TL8 (E) IQ [1]-13; Current Affairs/TL8 (Science and Technology) (E) IQ [1]-13; Driving/TL8 (Automobile) (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Electrician/TL8 (A) IQ [1]-13*; Electronics Operation/TL8 (Security) (A) IQ [2]-13; Electronics Operation (Surveillance) (A) IQ [2]-13; Electronics Repair/TL8 (Security) (A) IQ+1 [2]-14*; Electronics Repair/TL8 (Surveillance) (A) IQ+1 [2]-14*; Explosives/TL8 (Demolition) (A) IQ [2]-13; Fast-Draw (Pistol) (E) DX [1]-12; First Aid/TL8 (E) IQ [1]-13; Forensics/TL8 (H) IQ-2 [1]-11; Games (Chess) (E) IQ [1]-13; Gunner/TL8 (Machine Gun) (E) DX+1 [2]-13; Guns/TL8

(Grenade Launcher) (E) DX+3 [4]-15†; Guns/TL8 (Pistol) (E) DX+6 [20]-18; Knife (E) DX [1]-12; Lockpicking (A) IQ [2]-13; Machinist/TL8 (A) IQ [1]-13*; Mechanic/TL8 (Automobile) (A) IQ+1 [2]-14*; Merchant (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Research/TL8 (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Scrounging (E) Per [1]-13; Search (A) Per-1 [1]-12; Streetwise (A) IQ-1 [1]-12; Traps (A) IQ+1 [4]-14.

* Includes +1 from Artificer.

† Improved from Guns (Pistol).

Gear

Pistol's weapon of choice is a PDW with an under-barrel 40mm grenade launcher and experimental Smartgun electronics. He also routinely carries a revolver, .357M, adapted to fire 9mm or .380 ammo; a holdout pistol, .380; a Taser; a cavalry saber; and a large knife. He wears a TL9 ballistic suit with combat hardsuit helmet, ballistic gloves, and assault boots. He usually drives a Land Rover SUV.

ROSENCRANTZ/ GULDENSTERN (GRETE LIEBNICHT)

311 points

Born in Berlin in 1946 to an unknown father, Grete Liebnicht ran away from an orphanage at the age of 15. By 1964, she was a heroin addict in Hamburg, making money in any way she could and injecting a variety of substances, including regular doses of antibiotics, heroin cut with cheaper substances, and other chemicals given to her when she volunteered for medical experiments. At first, she assumed her powers were mere hallucinations, until one night when she was mugged and her duplicate appeared behind her assailant and came to her aid. Working together, they killed the mugger; afterward, they approached a local crime lord to offer their services in exchange for him finding them a teacher. By the time the Berlin Wall fell, Grete was an accomplished assassin, spy, and well-paid double agent.

Grete tried retiring after the end of the Cold War; she traveled extensively for a few years before settling down in London, but she eventually became bored. When Andronicus offered her the chance to steal some irreplaceable antiques from a wealthy politician they both detested, she agreed, and soon she was a regular participant in Andronicus' schemes.

Grete rarely becomes involved in combat, except in emergencies; her role in Andronicus' heists usually involves disguising herself to gain access to a victim's property while others on the team provides muscle, transport, diversionary attacks, and the like.

When not disguised, she appears unattractive and ancient, with white hair and parchment-like white skin. She hides red eyes behind colored contacts.

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 13 [60]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 14 [40].

Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 12 [4]; Will 12 [0]; Per 13 [5]; FP 14 [0].

As an easy, fun prop, devise "membership IDs" for the group. In game, they might even provide abilities on their own, like being communicators or a sign of government authority.

Basic Speed 7.00 [5]; Basic Move 7 [0];
Dodge 10.
5'8"; 145 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: German (Native) [0];
English (Native) [6]; French (Accented)
[4]; Russian (Accented) [4].

Advantages

Ambidexterity [5]; Double-Jointed
[15]; Duplication 1 (Dupe shares HT and
FP, -40%) [21]; Elastic Skin (Temporary
Disadvantage: Low Pain Threshold
while skin is altered, -10%) [18];
Regeneration (Regular) [25]; Resistant
to Poison (+3) [5]; Special Rapport
(Other duplicate) [10]; Status 1 [0]*;
Voice [10]; Wealth (Very Wealthy) [30].

Disadvantages

Appearance (Unattractive) [-4]; Greed (15) [-7]; Phobia
(Fire) (12) [-5]; Unusual Biochemistry [-5]; Vulnerability
(Heat/Fire x2) [-30]; Weakness (Sunlight, 1d for 30 minutes;
Variable) [-9].

Quirks: Calls herself lesbian, but sleeps with men more
often than women; Chauvinistic; Distinctive Feature (Albino);
Proud. [-4]

Skills

Acrobatics (H) DX-2 [1]-11; Acting (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Dancing
(A) DX-1 [1]-12; Disguise (A) IQ+4 [2]-16‡; Escape (H) DX+3
[1]-16‡; Fast-Talk (A) IQ+2 [2]-14§; Filch (A) DX [2]-13;
Garrote (E) DX+1 [2]-14; Guns (Pistol) (E) DX+1 [2]-14;
Holdout (A) IQ [2]-12; Karate (H) DX-1 [2]-12; Knife (E) DX
[1]-13; Mimicry (Speech) (A) IQ+5 [16]-17§; Observation (A)
Per-1 [1]-12; Pickpocket (H) DX [4]-13; Poisons/TL8 (H) IQ-1
[2]-11; Professional Skill (Prostitute) (A) IQ [2]-12;
Research/TL8 (A) IQ [2]-12; Running (A) HT+1 [4]-15; Savoir-
Faire (High Society) (E) IQ [1]-12; Scrounging (E) Per [1]-13;
Search (A) Per-1 [1]-12; Sex Appeal (A) HT [2]-14§¶; Stealth
(A) DX [2]-13; Streetwise (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Urban Survival (A)
Per [2]-13; Wrestling (A) DX+1 [4]-14.

Techniques: Impersonate (Target) (A) Mimicry (Speech)
[3]-17.

* One level free from Wealth.

‡ Includes +5 from Double-Jointed.

‡ Includes +4 from Elastic Skin.

§ Includes +2 from Voice.

¶ Includes -2 from Appearance.

Gear

Grete usually wears a disguise when on the job. Otherwise,
she carries a holdout pistol, small folding knife, and ballistic
vest underneath expensive clothes.



FORTINBRAS (DAISUKE FUKUDA)

84 points

The middle son of a successful
Japanese businessman and distant
descendant of samurai, Fukuda was
sent to London to study computer
programming and improve his
English. His criminal career began
almost accidentally shortly after his
18th birthday, when a drunken
classmate ran down a pedestrian
and managed to pin the blame on
Fukuda, his equally drunk passen-
ger. While in jail, Fukuda met Player
King Tybalt who shared his enthusi-
asm for swords, and they became
friends. A few weeks later, Fukuda
was in a prison van with Tybalt when

Rosencrantz/Guildenstern hijacked it; Tybalt, suspecting that
Fukuda would soon be caught if he tried to run, persuaded
Pistol to take the young man on as an apprentice.

Fukuda's "apprenticeship" requires him to field-test Pistol's
prototype battlesuits, of which the Fortinbras is the latest.
Though not vicious by nature, Fukuda does like weapons and
mostly enjoys his work; more importantly, he is too ashamed
to return home, even though each month he stays with the
Player Kings sees him implicated in even more crimes.

Andronicus and Pistol regard Fukuda as expendable, and
his suit only slightly less so, meaning that Fortinbras is often
sent off on his own as a diversion while the rest of the gang
attempts a less visible heist elsewhere. Tybalt may still come to
his aid in these circumstances, and Fukuda is too loyal to the
group to ever betray the Player Kings.

Fukuda is a Japanese teenager with dark eyes, pale golden
skin, straight black hair in ponytail, and a wispy moustache.

ST 10 [0], **DX** 12 [40], **IQ** 12 [40], **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0];
FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.50 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8.
5'6"; 130 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].

CF: East Asian (Native) [0]; Western [1].

Languages: Japanese (Native) [0]; English (Accented) [4].

Advantages

Unusual Background (Gadgeteer Friend) [15].

Disadvantages

Bad Sight (Nearsighted, Mitigator: Contact Lenses, -60%)
[-10]; Clueless [-10]; Duty (9) (To Player Kings; Extremely

Unless teleporters are cheap and common, super headquarters can either be convenient or secure, but seldom both.

Hazardous) [-10]; Impulsiveness (15) [-5]; Oblivious [-5]; Overconfidence (12) [-5]; Pacifism (Reluctant Killer) [-5]; Sense of Duty (Player Kings) [-5]; Social Stigma (Criminal Record) [-5].

Quirks: Collects anime and manga; Hates his nickname "Daisy"; Incompetence (Merchant); No drugs or alcohol; Proud of his samurai ancestry. [-5]

Skills

Accounting (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Battlesuit/TL9 (A) DX+2 [8]-14; Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-13; Broadsword (A) DX+2 [8]-14; Computer Hacking/TL8 (VH) IQ-1 [4]-11; Computer Operation/TL8 (E) IQ [1]-12; Computer Programming/TL8 (H) IQ [4]-12; Driving/TL8 (Automobile) (A) DX-1 [1]-11; Electronics Operation/TL8 (Security) (A) IQ [2]-12; Fast-Draw (Sword) (E) DX+1 [2]-13; First Aid/TL8 (E) IQ [1]-12; Forced Entry (E) DX [1]-12; Guns (LMG) (E) DX+2 [4]-14; History (Japanese) (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; Hobby Skill (Manga and anime trivia) (E) IQ+1 [2]-13; Scrounging (E) Per [1]-12; Tactics (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Throwing (A) DX [2]-12; Two-Handed Sword (A) DX-1 [2]-11.

Gear

Battlesuit (TL9; Provides DR 30, Lifting ST +20, Noisy 2, Penetrating Voice, and Striking ST +20; Sealed with helmet on; 8 hours of power; Weekly maintenance by one person; 150 lbs.); battlesuit helmet (TL9; Provides Filtered Lungs, No Peripheral Vision, Protected Vision, Protected Smell, Protected Vision, and Radio; 15 lbs.); LMG; katana; web gear; small air tank (45 minutes); ATV.

TYBALT (ROBERT REGIS)

364 points

Robert Regis grew up in a rough neighborhood of South Chicago, and learned to fight at an early age. Though a gifted athlete, he was not a team player, preferring to compete one on one. After learning savate, he discovered fencing and was soon a contender for the Olympic team. He also learned to act, playing supporting roles in Shakespearean plays; he was soon in demand as an instructor, teaching fencing to William Murcott (before his accident), as well as many other actors.

Regis' life changed while in Scotland, when he returned to the parking lot after a training session and discovered someone trying to steal his prized Jaguar. When the young car thief insulted him, Regis lost his temper and fatally stabbed the boy.

During his murder trial, while the jury was out, Regis received a message from Murcott (now calling himself Andronicus) asking whether he wanted to join the Player Kings rather than spend the next several years in a British jail. Regis accepted, and the Player Kings went to work on the jury, bribing, intimidating, and even impersonating jurors to bring back a verdict of "not proven." Regis, realizing that he'd enjoyed the sensation of killing the car thief more than he could publicly admit, soon found himself spending as much of his time as the masked Tybalt as he did as Robert Regis.

After he was arrested for a second murder and escaped, Regis disappeared from public view completely, except for occasional appearances at fencing tournaments (which usually serve as diversions for one of Andronicus' devious schemes).

In his late 20s, handsome Tybalt has a tanned complexion, chestnut hair and mustache, and dark green eyes.

ST 13 [30]; **DX** 16 [120]; **IQ** 10 [0]; **HT** 13 [30].

Damage 1d/2d-1; BL 34 lbs.; HP 16 [6]; Will 10 [0]; Per 11 [5]; FP 16 [9]

Basic Speed 7.25 [0]; Basic Move 7 [0]; Dodge 11*; Parry 14*†; Block 12*.
6'1"; 180 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0]; Italian (Broken) [2].

Advantages

Ambidexterity [5]; Appearance (Handsome) [12]; Combat Reflexes [15]; Enhanced Parry 1 (All weapons) [10]; Fashion Sense [5]; Fearlessness 3 [6]; High Pain Threshold [10]; Night Vision 5 [5]; Perfect Balance [15]; Trained by Master [30]; Very Fit [15]; Weapon Master (Fencing Weapons) [30].

Perks: Improvised Weapons (Karate); No Hangover; Style Familiarity (Italian Fencing School); Style Familiarity (Savate). [4]

Disadvantages and Quirks

Bad Temper (9) [-15]; Bloodlust (6) [-20]; Code of Honor (Pirate's) [-5]; Curious (9) [-7]; Impulsiveness (12) [-10]; Jealousy [-10]; Lecherousness (15) [-7]; Overconfidence (12) [-5]; Social Stigma (Criminal Record) [-5].

Quirks: Chauvinistic; Drives too fast; Hates dogs and rats; Particularly attracted to blonde women (reacts at extra +1); Proud; Uncongenial. [-6]

Skills

Acrobatics (H) DX+1 [4]-17§; Acting (A) IQ+1 [4]-11; Climbing (A) DX+1 [2]-17§; Current Affairs/TL8 (Sports) (E) IQ [1]-10; Dancing (A) DX [2]-16; Driving/TL8 (Automobile) (A) DX [2]-16; Erotic Art (A) DX [2]-16; Fast-Draw (Knife) (E) DX+2 [2]-18*; Fast-Draw (Sword) (E) DX+2 [2]-18*; Fast-Talk (A) IQ [2]-10; First Aid/TL8 (E) IQ [1]-10; Flying Leap (H) IQ [4]-10; Games (Fencing sport) (E) IQ [1]-10; Guns/TL8 (Pistol) (E) DX [1]-16; Intimidation (A) Will+1 [4]-11; Karate (H) DX [4]-16; Main-Gauche (A) DX+1 [3]-17¶; Observation (A) Per [2]-11; Performance (A) IQ [2]-10; Power Blow (Rapier) (H) Will [4]-10; Rapier (A) DX+2 [8]-18; Riding (Horse) (A) DX-1 [1]-15; Running (A) HT+1 [4]-14; Saber (A) DX+1 [3]-17¶; Savoir-Faire (Salle) (E) IQ [1]-10; Sex Appeal (A) HT+4 [2]-17‡; Shield (Buckler) (E) DX [1]-16; Stage Combat (A) DX-1 [1]-15; Streetwise (A) IQ+1 [4]-11; Teaching (A) IQ+1 [4]-11; Thrown Weapon (Knife) (E) DX+1 [2]-17; Wrestling (A) DX [2]-16.

Techniques: Back Kick (Karate) (H) Karate [2]-13; Kicking (H) Karate [3]-16; Roll With Blow (H) Karate [3]-16.

Creating a newspaper headline for each adventure can help jog the group's memory and provide an overarching context.

- * Includes +1 for Combat Reflexes.
- † Includes +1 from Enhanced Parry.
- ‡ Includes +4 from Appearance.
- § Includes +1 for Perfect Balance.
- ¶ Improved from Rapier.

Gear

Very fine edged rapier (with basket hilt); main-gauche; holdout pistol, .380; small knife; 3 daggers; ballistic vest; leather jacket; face mask or ballistic sunglasses; boots; gloves.

New Friends and Stranger Company

As the Player Kings build a reputation, they will receive interest from several other supervillains to their ranks. Future possible additions to the team include Starveling, who is able to absorb matter; the speedster Mistress Quickly; the flame-throwing Hotspur; the ice-blasting Angelo; the amphibious Dauphin; and more. Using these new members, the GM can introduce the Player Kings again while maintaining some level of surprise; if the heroes encounter Mistress Quickly and the Dauphin at the beginning of an adventure, they need not know *who* these new villains work for.

ADVENTURE SEEDS

The Arms Merchant of Venice: Shortly before a major summit talk in Venice, the heroes receive a fairly reliable tip that Tybalt and Pistol have been seen in the city. Pistol is known to hate one of the British politicians who will be attending the summit, and police fear that he may try to assassinate him.

Alternatively, these rumors may be intended to divert superheroes from the Player Kings' real plan.

No Deadly Drug: When a promising young actor dies of an overdose, the Player Kings declare war on the city's drug dealers. After several have been killed, the PCs receive a letter, supposedly from Andronicus, telling them when and where a huge shipment will be arriving. Is it a diversion, a trap, a hoax, or a genuine effort to help?

The Mouse Trap: After Andronicus sends Fortinbras out alone for a highly visible diversionary attack, causing property damage but not harming any innocent bystanders, a police officer suggests that this may be their chance to discover the Player Kings' current hide-out. The heroes might follow Fortinbras, placing a tracking device on his suit, using him as bait in a trap, or even stealing his armor and impersonating him. Of course, Andronicus may have anticipated this . . .

Sharper than a Serpent's Tooth: After three women are raped then fatally stabbed with a rapier, a journalist blames the murders on Tybalt. The next day, the journalist is found dead, fatally stabbed with a similar blade. Is Tybalt responsible for any of these murders? Or are some (or all) of them the work of a copycat? Efforts by Tybolt to prove his innocence can provide a reversal of an expected Player Kings encounter.

His Hour upon the Stage: Irritated by a film of *King Lear* starring an actor better known for action thrillers, Andronicus kidnaps the star and demands the \$20 million profits from the film as ransom. Andronicus also demands the release of any Player Kings in custody, plus a promise from the studio not to produce any more reality TV shows. He further insists that his half of the ransom be delivered by the PCs, who will then be given instructions to find the star (the other half is to be given to charity). If the heroes follow Andronicus' orders, they will be led on a merry chase – carrying the money through dangerous parts of town, into rough bars and strip clubs, and so on – before they drop off the money and find the actor. Unknown to them, Rosencrantz/Guildenstern is impersonating the star; if she isn't stopped, she will steal the actor's entire fortune before he is released.

GURPS

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RANDOM THOUGHT TABLE

THE CROOKED PATH

BY STEVEN MARSH, *PYRAMID* EDITOR

One option for gamers in a supers campaign is playing a villain who has reformed and become a hero. This possibility had perhaps its biggest public boost in the supers sphere with the advent of the Thunderbolts super-team, in 1997. In the first issue of the *Thunderbolts* series, this new team of heroes revealed itself (to the audience) to be rebranded members of the Masters of Evil, intent on letting everyone believe them to be good guys before springing a trap that would enable them to conquer the world. Many members of the team came to like being heroes and considered turning against this plot, and the series revolved around the definition of heroism and the role of redemption.

Their brand of heroics had an earlier template, stretching back at least to villains Hawkeye and the Scarlet Witch legitimately reforming and becoming members of the Avengers, way back in 1965. Many edgy villains have become dark heroes (and vice versa): Venom, Catwoman, the Punisher, and more.

Likewise, many non-superheroes have found an origin in reformed villainy: Xena, the A-Team, Boston Blackie, Javert, Robin Hood, and others. (Further complicating matters, some comic characters steadfastly refuse to be pigeonholed into “good/bad” categories, such as many of the costume-clad folks from *Watchmen*.)

Alone, a reformed criminal can be a good counterpoint to a team’s straitlaced members. As a group, villains-turned-heroes can also serve as dramatic mix-ups of established supers tropes; what happens when the police are someone to fear, or encountering someone from your childhood home town is a cause for panic instead of nostalgia?

From a gaming standpoint, here are some of the issues when playing a character who jumps on both sides of the moral track.

A REASON FOR TURNING

Any former villain who joins the side of angels should have a good justification for doing so. (Of course, for mercenaries, this can be as simple as, “The good guys are paying me better.”)

While this justification could be something as simple as the villain waking up and realizing he doesn’t like being a bad guy, it probably makes for a better story if the now-hero had an epiphany moment. Perhaps he witnessed the consequences of crime (his own or others’) and was somehow moved; criminal actions might have even touched his personal or familial life.

Perhaps a respected hero or the government gave the villain a shot at redemption; sometimes all that’s required to do right is to be asked. Of course, the possibility of having criminal records scrubbed clean or kept sealed can be a powerful motivator.

For a character concept that isn’t tackled much in mainstream comics, it’s possible the hero has had not merely a moral epiphany, but a spiritual or religious one. Although it would be very unusual, it could be quite interesting for Razorblood the Assassin to leave his old life and persona because he was “born again.” A crisis of faith could be very problematic, especially if the former villain was an unstable or dangerous force – such as a former hulking monster! (If dealing with a real-world religion, the gaming group would do well to be vague, respectful, or both.)

THE CRIMINAL BACKGROUND

Another question the player and GM need to sort out is, how much of a criminal was the PC before the conversion, and how much does that past still haunt him? Someone who was a street-gang leader without a criminal record beyond a juvenile sentence or a couple of misdemeanors can be “reformed” and doesn’t have too much to worry about as a former criminal. Conversely, someone who was a hired killer for a decade no doubt has countless murder charges that are pending (or can be raised), and “redemption” may be a more moral concept than a legal one. Such a hero will almost certainly spend his entire crime-fighting career on the run from the law, unless his fortune is changed by something truly phenomenal: time-tweaking satellite, memory-erasing demon, or the like. Fortunately, those are not in short supply in many campaigns.

Try to refrain from introducing time travel in a supers campaign as long as possible. It adds a lot of complications and doesn’t give back as much as you think.

I know how to stop these guys from robbing this bank; I've robbed it before!

For those who were truly class-1-felony material before turning, there is another question: If the hero has seriously repented, then why doesn't he do the "right" thing and turn himself in for his past crimes? (The question might rise for penitents with lesser crimes, but in those cases, it's quite possible for the hero to throw himself on the mercy of authorities and make amends.) There are a number of answers to this, but options include contending he can do more good on the outside than in prison, having a long-running plot thread that needs to be resolved first (such as "searching for the person who killed my family"), or believing that the criminal justice system is too corrupt or untrustworthy to offer a fair sentence.

ROGUES GALLERY

From a game standpoint, one nice thing about a former criminal is that he can effectively double (or more) the domains his rogues gallery can come from. A number of reasons exist to hunt him! The hero obviously will draw the ire of any criminals he crosses paths with, just like his more traditional counterparts. But he might also come to blows with criminals who he knew in his former life, because they're afraid he'll turn them in or otherwise reveal information about their operations. Likewise, some supercriminals would want to kill the hero as an object lesson for others in the malevolent metahuman community who might be tempted to turn to the good side!

The reformed villain may also have made any number of enemies among those who serve the law, and the reformed villain might face threats from all manner of police, public officials, and heroes who distrust him. Finally, he could experience an uphill battle trying to convince the general public to trust him as well. Of course, given the popularity of outlaws, it's entirely possible that a reformed villain might be or become *more* popular than his always-heroic counterparts!

SECRET IDENTITY

A reformed villain may adopt a secret identity for any of the same reasons a hero would, including a desire to keep friends and family safe. But he might also foster an alter ego to distance himself, not from a personal life, but from a former villainous one!

Depending on the nature of the hero's powers, this may be easier said than done. No one is likely to be fooled by the disappearance of Whipper-Will, the world's foremost whip-wielding villain, when he comes back a month later as the crime-fighting Whippit Good. But many power sets can change their manifestations to appear different enough to fool folks... especially generic abilities like flight and energy blast.

Perhaps an energy-wielding super creates a constant aura of that energy, surrounding himself with it in most situations

and creating a new look. Maybe a new costume accessory, such as a cape, or a (seeming) change of ability use provides enough distraction. ("There's no way Sci-Fire could be Archmage Flambus!") Any technological villains – including those in suits of armor – can create a new set of gadgets that have little resemblance to their old look. For villains with sufficient abilities or resources, a change of sex or a radical alteration of appearance can work wonders!

MORAL ISSUES

One reason former villains are so interesting to play is that genre conventions of heroic expectations don't weigh on them. We all know Superguy's code against killing is absolute, or the Winsome Loser will not use his spider-powers to steal the money he needs to make rent. But "I won't kill/steal/torture" is a much more known and knowable position than "I won't kill/steal/torture again," and the "right" situation – the opportunity to steal millions from a criminal for charity, or the desire for justice after a villain escapes punishment on a technicality of the law – might present true and interesting quandaries for the hero, especially if the reason is just or can be potentially justified by the hero's new morality.

One of the greatest ethical issues faced by most former criminals is the temptation to succumb to old habits. This can create any number of in-game complications. Maybe a former bloodthirsty villain needs to keep his rage in check in battle, or maybe a hero who used to be a jewel thief is given the task of guarding one of the world's largest diamonds.

This lure of a fully villainous life can also form the basis for lengthier subplots. Will the reformed criminal realize that, no matter how much he wants to change Death Alley, the evil of that neighborhood will always prevail? How will the former brick react when he discovers the government job he accepted to clear his record seems to be a suicide run?

THE LONG JOURNEY

As a final possibility, what if the group wants to play the entire redemptive arc? A series of adventures could revolve around the lives of the villains, perhaps drawing inspiration from *Reservoir Dogs*, *Ocean's Eleven*, *Fight Club*, or other crime-based works. Then an adventure can be thrown in with the assumption that it will provide the bad guys (or at least some of them) with enough of an impetus to change their allegiances and start working for the good guys. This idea can let players and GMs who have wanted to dabble in a supervillain campaign an outlet, knowing that their work on those characters and stories won't go to waste.

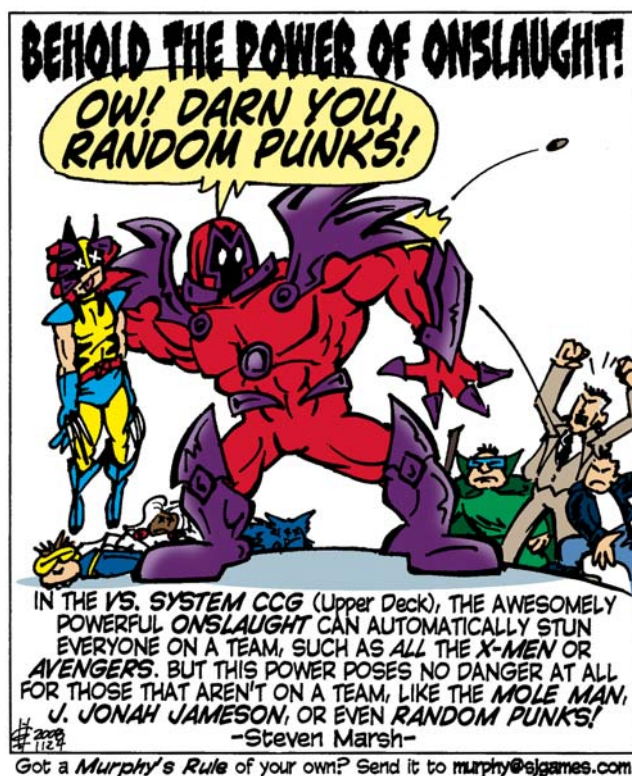
Playing a heroic former-villain opens all kinds of possibilities for supers campaigns. And always remember: Criminals had those domino masks first!

Genre rule: Changing clothes takes a lot less time in a supers universe.

HUMOR

MURPHY'S RULES

BY GREG HYLAND



FNORDPLAY



*The villain's last face-off
went unexpectedly.*

Think you can do better? Send your caption for this illustration to pyramid@sjgames.com.

Headlines After a Botched Supers Adventure

- Reward Offered for Clockwork Mayor's Capture
- Starting Today: Orbital Laser Five-Day Forecast
- Lphbt Vlln Stls Wrld's Vwls
- Half of City Succumbs to Prevarication Serum . . . or Does It?
- Ninjas Killing Those Caught Reading Headlines

Unusual idea: The Useless Squad. This is a team composed entirely of heroes whose innate abilities can be entirely duplicated by technology. Heroes might have telescopic or microscopic vision, bulletproof skin, radio hearing, and so on.

RECOMMENDED READING

THIS LOOKS LIKE A JOB FOR . . .

BY ANDY VETROMILE

Board and card games based on supers are a hit-and-miss phenomenon. Roleplaying games – being open-ended, creative exercises – are a far more dependable format for duplicating the derring-do of the four-color world. There are successful examples from all entries, but crossing over from one medium to another may yield far more options to a table hungry for cape-and-cowl adventure.

One of the brightest stars in the supers sky is *Numbers League* (\$19.95, Bent Castle Games, www.bentcastle.com). This educational card game of capturing supervillains through manipulation of numbers is one of the finest examples of games that actually teach as they entertain. Players draw and discard cards to create their super team; each hero needs legs, a torso, and a head (all mixed and matched amusingly), and they may also get bits of gear or equipment to help them. Further customization comes through an assist from the Sidekick, an additional character all players help build and get access to.

Each hero card has a number, and wise use of these results in a total that, when compared to the villain cards on the table, indicates which bad guys may be targeted for capture. The hero who collects the best of the worst wins the game. The cards for the enemies are wonderfully comic-bookish; even without names, they look like they stepped right out of a real publication. A GM could use these (double-sided) portraits as inspiration for new foes, as a rogues' gallery, or as a random generator should there be a prison break. It might even be possible, depending on whether the group is willing to go to the effort, to map a player-character team to the hero cards and use the game as a substitute form of "mass super combat" rules. (An Infinity supplement is now also available for the game.) A similar effect could be achieved with a themed game like *Super Munchkin* (\$24.95, Steve Jackson Games, www.sjgames.com).

If an actual set of miniatures is wanted, several different lines of *Heroclix* figures are on the market (prices vary, WizKids, www.wizkidsgames.com). Although somewhat limiting if the group isn't playing an RPG based on one of the major comic-book companies, miniatures fans are renowned for their willingness to tinker through – repainting or resculpting – with the out-of-the-box components. (Players may be a little more reluctant when the figures as-is are worth a bit of cash, but some of the common pieces can be had in bulk for a song.)

With other sets of miniatures come other ways of resolving a super form of combat. If it's the heroes against a horde of minions, games like *Zombies!!!* (\$27.99, Twilight Creations, Inc., www.twilightcreationsinc.com) and *Last Night on Earth* (\$49.95, Flying Frog Productions, www.flying-frog.net) are ideal. Sure, those deal with the undead, but tweak them just a little, and the game becomes about super-capable capes mowing down a bunch of useless henchmen who can only field a decent offense through strength of numbers. For a more even fight, put the team up against a big bug from the *Starship Troopers Miniatures Game* (\$75, Mongoose Publishing, www.mongoosepublishing.com). Now they have to work to earn their living.

To give the hero more than just a face, use Fantasy Flight's (www.fantasyflightgames.com) upcoming relaunch of *Cosmic Encounter* (\$59.95) as the springboard to new powers. The underlying game has everyone take on a race attempting to conquer the galaxy by manipulating the rules with their special ability. Now extend those powers, as a theme, to high-powered crime-fighters. Some of these will generate familiar results – characters that read minds or manipulate probabilities – while others can lead in entirely new directions. The hero might be a form of intelligent virus or infection, or he might use money in creative new ways to achieve gains against the scum of the city.

Genre rule: If more than half the members of a team can fly under their own power, there should never be a discussion of how the heroes use the restroom.

Another element of super settings that games can help with is the world itself. The heroes are typically part of a worldwide phenomenon that gives ordinary folks powers, and this affects the whole planet. Imagine doing some metagaming by using a “worldwide” game – say **Risk** (\$24.99, Hasbro, www.hasbro.com) or **Dust** (\$59.95, Fantasy Flight, www.fantasyflightgames.com) – to determine how far some influences had reached. The progress of everything from an alien invasion to a planetary plague could be tracked (or even played, should the GM be willing to forgo some amount of control) using a modified form of the board game to duplicate the success or failure of those enterprises. The aforementioned **Cosmic Encounter** can do the same, but on the galactic stage.

To give the players some input (and the GM some free context) on what their enemies are doing, everyone could spend an evening of the campaign playing **Mwahahaha** (\$34.99, White Wolf, www.white-wolf.com), pitting mad scientists against one another to see who comes out on top in a sort of villainous “bet.” And on a slightly smaller scale, political games like **1960: The Making of the President** (\$49.99, Z-Man Games, www.zmangames.com) could determine the current standing of a power-mad supervillain trying to subvert the system “legally.”

The heroes seldom have more than their own town to worry about, but that makes the city that much more important. A number of fine supplements exist on the market toward that end, including **Ptolus** (\$119.99), from writer extraordinaire Monte Cook (www.montecook.com), and the **World's Largest City** (\$100, Alderac, www.alderac.com). Both are fantasy-themed, but that only works to the GM's advantage in converting it to his purposes as a completely executed, living city for his NPCs' schemes to gestate in. Of course, if he wants something more on-task, **Hudson City: The Urban Abyss** (\$26.99, Hero Games, www.herogames.com) is an excellent resource for super adventures. Admittedly created more with the low-level vigilante hero in mind than the four-color planet mover, it's an organic and intelligently designed work done in the proper vein.

Tracking the villains is part and parcel of the hero's patrolling duties. **Heroes Incorporated** (\$39.95, Quest Machine, www.questmachine.com) has a system for randomizing outbreaks of crime on its city map, an idea easily stolen, borrowed for the campaign (along with its extremely streamlined system of hero-on-villain combat). Meanwhile, **The Fury of Dracula** (\$59.95, Fantasy Flight Games, www.fantasyflightgames.com) makes extensive use of a blind system for a supervillain eluding his pursuers while cultivating plans to fruition. Switch the vampire's identity for the GM's favorite ultra-menace (or don't – Dracula makes a fine adversary for heroes), modify some of the plots he leaves

dotted about the European countries – a cadre of vampire minions may become a terrorist cell – and one has a campaign in a box (so to speak).

And since it's all about the roleplaying, some honorable mentions from that format are in order. The most recent edition of **Dungeons & Dragons** (\$34.95 each, Wizards of the Coast, www.wizards.com) has come under fire for its more-than-passing similarities to on-line RPG environments, but for anyone familiar with **City of Heroes** (\$14.99 per month, City of Heroes, www.cityofheroes.com) and its ilk, it at least mimics the super genre well. Its use of powers is better suited to a super combat than a fantasy dungeon; combine it with Wizards' **Star Wars** game (\$39.95), complete with Force powers, and the character options become endless.

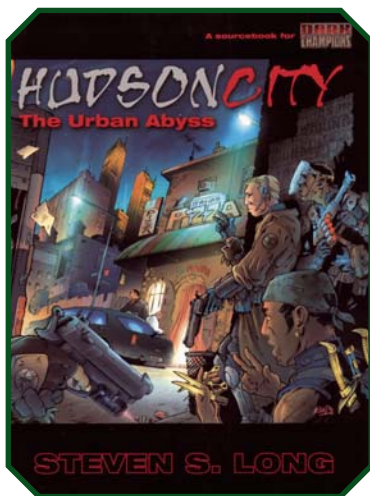
Extend the toolbox even further with **The Authority** (\$44.95, Guardians of Order). Not only a good source of material for really high-powered characters, the book is also a **d20 System**-compatible product (though it does hail from Third Edition, so it will take some work to adapt it to something more modern).

If the team wants champions on the same playing field as the Thors and Supermans, White Wolf's **Scion** series (\$34.99 each, www.white-wolf.com) is a good choice. More pre-

campaign work is necessary since it's not nearly as freewheeling as a “real” super game, but it offers powers and it does come in three stages (hero, demigod, and god). GMs can therefore run their players through a traditional, mythic trilogy (think Matt Wagner's **Mage**-style heroic journey; www.mattwagnercomics.com) as they gain in stature.

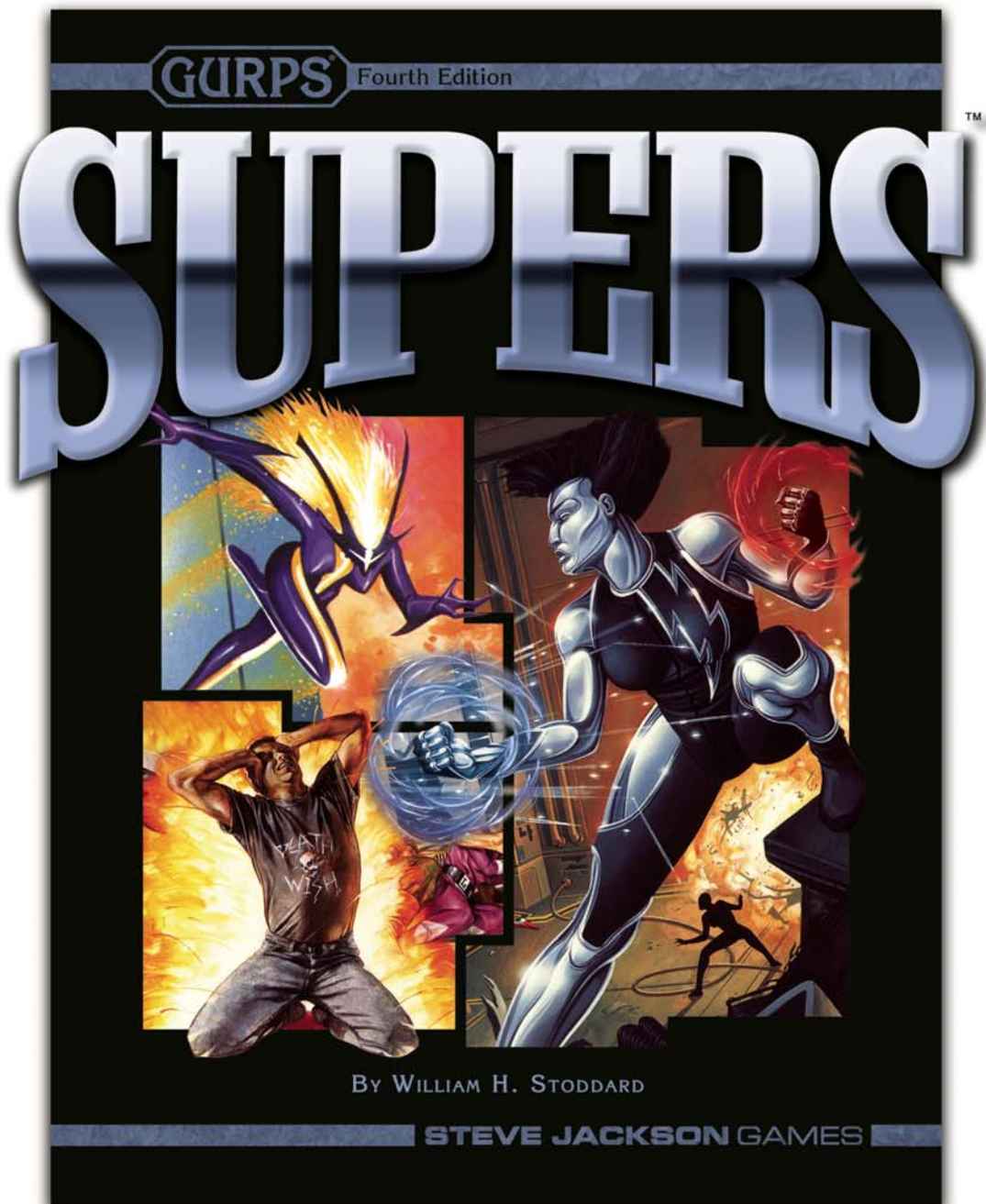
On still another level, supervillains do so love to challenge the heroes' wits, and many of their plots involve putting the team through its paces, even if it's just a distraction while they put the finishing touches on the death beam. A game need not be reflected in the day-to-day actions of a hero – turning this thing on its ear, the game could be part the adventure. The GM can take his favorite game – strategy types (like chess or go) work best for this – and make a twisted form of it the crime-fighters' contest. The entire city becomes the playing board, and each move is only accomplished if the heroes beat the villain at any given “space.” A location might demand the good guys fight a minion there, or just answer a riddle of some sort. Success means they “win the space.” Failure may mean the villain is that much closer to unleashing his weapons, or he might claim the corresponding building as a sort of sick trophy, trying to level it to the ground.

Using clichés and tropes to best effect is what makes a game duplicating the heroics of the super community so appealing to most. Falling backward into these comfortable notions about what makes the comics worth reading is pretty easy, and finding another game with points in common is also simple when its base elements are considered. Nothing is more powerful than the players' imaginations, but even the best super games can use the occasional infusion of super serum.



Tip for stealthy heroes: Having gear in pouches and belts is useful, but it tends to rattle around and make noise if you don't design your carriers with plenty of padding (which takes up space).

MORE THAN HUMAN



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RECOMMENDED READING

No CAPES!

BY MATTHEW POOK

Capes.

As good as they look on the pages of your comic book – after all, how menacing is Batman without that voluminous cape of his casting an imposing silhouette and helping throw himself into the shadows? Outside of the four-color genre, capes manage to be both impractical and silly. They can even get a hero killed. Alan Moore pointed that out in *Watchman* with the death of costumed adventurer Dollar Bill, who gunned down by bank robbers after his cape got caught in a revolving door. My inspiration, Edna “E” Mode (the superhero costume designer in Pixar’s *The Incredibles*) also emphasized this when she barked the refrain, “No capes!” as she listed numerous cape-induced deaths: caught on a missile fin, in an express elevator, in a jet turbine, and sucked into a vortex.

Of course, you can still do four-color superhero roleplaying without capes, because for most heroes, it is merely a fashion statement. But let’s take it as our remit, superhero roleplaying without capes. Or in some cases without costumes.

Godlike (\$39.95, Arc Dream Publishing, www.arcdream.com) dispenses with costumes and capes but keeps its heroes in uniform. They’re military uniforms, in this alternate take on World War II where both sides field a new troop type, the Talent. Each is blessed with a gift or “talent” that defies rational explanation, except pure force of will. Such talents vary wildly, ranging from the very first Talent – *Der Fleiger’s* ability to fly – to the invulnerability of the American *Indestructible Man*, who can withstand any damage (up to and including a nuclear blast) as long as he knows its coming. However, most Talents possess abilities, that while incredible, are not as powerful. For example, *Lazy Bones* goes to sleep while his skeletal avatar goes to war; *Weisheitszahn* (or Wisdom Tooth) inflicts the pain of impacted wisdom teeth on his foes; and General de Gaulle’s bodyguard, *La Gladiatrix*, is a hyperskilled fencer capable of parrying bullets, but only with her father’s sword.

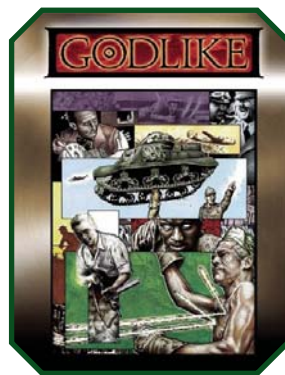
Once a Talent is revealed, he is assessed and sent to fight. Soldiers first, Allied Talents receive commando training and

are assigned to TOGs (Talent Operation Groups), small units that undertake mission of import. Nazi Talents (*Übermenschen*) are inducted into the SS. The primary set-up has the player characters as part of a TOG. What places a Talent apart from a superhero is his willpower, which fuels his talent. Indeed, rival Talents can enter a contest of wills to cancel each other’s abilities, even at a distance; Talents can inherently spot one another.

Just as **Godlike’s** world sets it apart from other superhero RPGs, so do its mechanics. The first RPG to use Greg Stoltze’s ORE (“One-Roll Engine”) mechanics (also used in **Wild Talents**, Arc Dream’s full superhero RPG), pools of 10-sided dice are rolled to get matches. So a roll of 4d10 could give the result 1, 5, 5, 9, expressed as 2x5. Interpreting this roll – which takes a little practice – determines the speed and effect of a talent or skill, or the speed, damage, and hit location of an attack. The wrinkle comes in two other dice types, purchased during character creation. Hard Dice are always set at 10, representing the maximum effect of a skill or talent, while Wiggle Dice are set at any number after a roll to get matches, effectively giving a Talent greater control over his talent. Overall, the grittiness (and often the lethality) of the ORE enhances the feel of **Godlike’s** world.

Building a talent in **Godlike** requires creative thinking by the player. A character needs to be a trained soldier first, hero or Talent second. The points available to buy his talent should be low and the player free to tinker with qualifiers that narrow a talent’s capability but increase its power. All Talents must have the disadvantage that he can be spotted by other Talents (unless he buys it off) and that his talent can be turned off in a contest of wills. Above all, every Talent should be as vulnerable to bullets as any other soldier, unless he has some kind of armor or invulnerability talent.

Another reason not to wear a cape or costume is that it actually identifies you as someone with super-powers. That is the last thing that you want in **Brave New World** (Alderac Entertainment Group, www.alderac.com).



What if a super didn't have a "costume" so much as a wardrobe (similar in scope to what most folks have)? This would allow variations to general uniform themes. For example, maybe the hero usually wears a cape, but he selects its color and shape depending on his mood.

Dropping the cape need not mean dropping the superhero genre.

In a nod to *The X-Men* storyline “Days of Futures Past,” the alternate USA of this RPG has been kept under martial law for the last 40 years by President For Life, John F. Kennedy, following the assassination attempt in 1963 by super-powered terrorists that put him in a wheelchair and killed his wife. Under the terms of Delta Registration Act, all super-powered individuals (known as Deltas) must register their abilities or face imprisonment for life. Delta Prime, a super-powered law-enforcement agency that most registered Deltas are enrolled in, was created by the American government to police both registered and unregistered Deltas. Delta Prime, of course, gets the costumes. The bad guys always have great tailors.

In response to martial law, the government is resisted by the Defiance, comprised of those Deltas who went underground. In recent years, the Defiance has become more organized, using the Internet as a means to keep both its members and the populace informed. Set primarily in Crescent City, located on Chicago Bay (the city itself having been destroyed in the 1976 super-powered Bicentennial Battle and its crater flooded), *Brave New World* provides a rich seam of stories exploring the fight against an American totalitarian state. Another superhero type, the Alpha, far more capable than the Deltas, was operating until 1976, but all disappeared in The Vanishing following the Bicentennial Battle.

Brave New World, as with *Godlike*, keeps most of the characters underpowered, and unless you have several sourcebooks, limited in options. Deltas are either speedsters, brawlers, fliers, gadgeteers (with the ability to create one super device), and so on, with just a wrinkle or two to their powers. The focused nature of the game’s power packages eases character generation, so personalities are simple to re-create in the point-buy superhero RPG of your choice. (The Hunted and Secret: Defiant traits for every player character is a given, of course.) Later supplements further detailed the setting, including many of its numerous secrets. However, because the game line was never completed, some secrets went undisclosed. Fortunately, designer Matt Forbeck has revealed them on his blog (www.forbeck.com).

Another reason not to wear a costume is that it implies a usefulness you might not have, even if you can shoot laser beams from your eyes, there isn’t the need for it at the call center where you work. And anyway, anyone with powers and a costume is either a crank or has got the costume and a superhero name trademarked and is a big celebrity. Still, there are some supervillains out there and even criminals with powers, so somebody has to turn watchmen, or at least detective, just as in Alan Moore’s *Top Ten*. In *Mutant City Blues* (\$40.00 Pelgrane Press, www.pelgrane.com), that someone is the Heightened Crimes Investigation

Unit, members of which investigate crimes connected to or committed by super-powered or Heightened individuals. With 1% of the population possessing mutant powers, that is a lot of Heightened crime! As HCIU officers, player characters are both Heightened and cops, investigating crimes that others avoid and acting as liaisons between the mutant and the normal communities.

Mutant City Blues is written for the publisher’s GUMSHOE System, which shifts the focus in investigative games from clue acquisition to clue interpretation – the HCIU officers possess the skill to find the clue, but it is up to the players to interpret the clue. This is essentially a police procedural, but with super powers and set in a major city (the rules take into account both American and British law enforcement) some 10 years into the future. Investigators need an understanding of Forensic Anamorphology (Anamorphology being the study of super-powers) to identify powers used during a crime, such as determining if a suspect really has been subject to Heightened mental influence.

Powers in *Mutant City Blues* are quite specific and tightly grouped. If you have the Tracking super ability, you are more likely to also have Olfactory Center, Environmental Awareness, and possibly Natural Weaponry; but if your senses expanded into Night or Thermal Vision, you also have the latent defect Voyeurism. This is because specific Heightened abilities are tied to particular gene nodes which the game maps out in its Quade Diagram for use not only during character generation, but also during play to identify the abilities of the Heightened suspects. For example, a crime involving both Mammal Control and Telekinesis will definitely involve more than one perpetrator, these powers being too far apart on the Quade Diagram. Although the Quade Diagram limits character choices compared to other superhero RPGs, it is the second element that makes *Mutant City Blues* stand out, the other being its police procedural basis.

Dropping the cape need not mean dropping the superhero genre, but it does mean moving your game out of the four-color world and into something that can be darker, more realistic, and perhaps even more demanding in play. As final recommendations, if as a GM you are still looking to create a superhero game without capes, then *Paragons* (\$39.99, Green Ronin Publishing, www.greenronin.com) for *Mutants & Masterminds* and *Truth & Justice* (\$25.00, Atomic Sock Monkey Press, www.atomicsockmonkey.com) are both excellent toolkits and starting points for further ideas.



In the interest of full disclosure, Steven Marsh, editor of this magazine, contributed to Paragons (though he did not provide Matthew Pook with his copy). Steven continues to do freelance writing and editing for Green Ronin Publishing.

AUTHOR BIOS

STEPHEN DEDMAN

Stephen Dedman is the author of *GURPS Dinosaurs* and the novels *Shadowrun: A Fistful of Data*; *The Art of Arrow Cutting*; *Shadows Bite*; and *Foreign Bodies*. He has also written a number of *Pyramid* articles and other RPG material, plus more than 100 short stories published in an eclectic variety of magazines and anthologies.

He is co-owner of Fantastic Planet, a science fiction and fantasy bookshop in Perth, Australia, and is trying to save enough experience points to buy off the long-standing Poverty: Struggling disadvantage. For more information, check out www.stephendedman.com.

STEVEN MARSH

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to RPG releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for almost nine years; during that time, he has won four Origins awards. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son Sam!, who is a two-year-old force of nature entirely worthy of his exclamation mark.

MATTHEW POOK

Matthew Pook resides in Birmingham, England with the requisite pair of black cats and a perky Goth (not obligatory, but fun nonetheless), plus more games than he can eat. A pedant and proofreader by day, a reviewer by night, he has been gaming for nearly 30 years. He has been saying mostly good things about those games for almost 10 of those years now.

BRIAN ROGERS

Brian Rogers has been thinking deep thoughts about supers since he read about the Fantastic Four being trapped in the Sargasso of Space. He has been translating those deep thoughts to RPGs since he got his first copy of *Villains and Vigilantes* in 1983. Yet somehow 25 years later, he still does not have super-powers, despite having written nearly 50 *Pyramid* articles.

Brian lives in Connecticut with his wife and daughter, where his presence is making them geekier by the day. If radiating geekness is his only power, he's going to be pretty depressed.

J. EDWARD TREMLETT

They call him . . . J. Edward Tremlett! By day, he's an unassuming bookstore clerk, but at night, he takes his ancient keyboard from its hiding place and unfurls his words upon the world. His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He's been the editor of *The Wraith Project*, and has seen print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu*. He's also part of the *Echoes of Terror* anthology. Currently, he writes for Op-Ed News, and lives in Lansing, Michigan, with his wife and three cats.

ANDY VETROMILE

Andy Vetromile is a freelance writer and editor with an insatiable taste for games. He's been reviewing them for over 10 years and still can't wait for the next release. He has also edited several *GURPS* books, including *GURPS Supers*.



Unusual idea: The Shifters. This is a team of heroes have power packages that are built with the same point totals. The heroes' powers shift around cyclically from day to day among teammates, but the underlying personalities are the same. How does the pacifist use the super-speed package compared to the assassin or the scientist?

LAST WORD

WITH STEVE LONG

For the Last Word in each issue of Pyramid, we'll chat with someone in the game industry known for work in the topic field. For this issue, we chatted with Hero Games' Steve Long, designer of the **Hero System Fifth Edition** and writer of more gaming books on super-heroics than perhaps anyone else on Earth. He's also been working closely with Cryptic Studios, the company behind the **Champions Online** MMORPG.

PYRAMID: So, Steve Long, world-renowned expert on all-things super, what is the Last Word on . . . supers?

STEVE LONG: Hmmm . . . I'd say the last word on supers is actually a sentence: "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

Interesting. What brings that to mind?

I was just thinking the other day that despite the rapid-fire pace of "change" you see in comics these days, driven by the one-creative-team-per-story-arc style of producing them, by and large the medium never changes significantly. When it comes down to it, serial characters popular enough to earn money have to stick around on some level, or the publisher loses out . . . hence the "no lasting deaths" trope.

So, while comics today might not be quite the same as when I was a kid, ultimately I think the similarities outweigh the differences!

Interesting. Does that realization affect how you approach comics as a reader or as a gamer? (Does knowing that Spider-Man probably isn't going to die mean you can't be affected?)

It does, and also affects how I think about superhero stories in gaming. The trick to telling a good superhero story isn't just to hook us with action and danger. Those are important, but ultimately we know the hero's not going to die.

So a really good superhero, and superhero story, has to have personal dramatic elements as well. In other words, we have to *know* the character, and *like* the character, for the story to have a true emotional impact on us. I think that's why Spider-Man has succeeded for so long; Spidey has a real human element to him that many heroes lack.

That's different from your standard dungeon-crawl fantasy, right?

In some ways, definitely. Dungeon-crawl fantasy generally has disposable characters who don't really have lives outside of their adventures. And that's not necessarily a bad thing; dungeon crawls are fun! But I think a good, long-lasting fantasy campaign will transcend that and go "beyond the dungeon" to give the characters lives and personalities and other things to do.

To tie it into gaming, then: How can supers gamers tie in the "More things change . . ." trope to their games? (Or should they?)

I think they should on some level, though it's important to remember that games aren't comics (or movies or novels or TV), so they don't always work the same. I think the best supers gaming stories and campaigns are ones that, like *Watchmen* or the best of the Ultimate Marvel imprint, look at the great classic superhero stories in new and refreshing ways. They show us new and intriguing perspectives on characters and events.

*The more things change,
the more they stay the same.*

– Steve Long

You can do the same thing in your gaming campaign by not just trotting out the same old "save the world" scenario week after week. Think about the characters and their world, and find a new way of focusing on them. You can't always do that, of course, but keep it in the back of your head and ideas will come to you! And if you don't mind a quick plug, I should mention we have a book all about this: **Villainy Amok**. It takes about a dozen classic supers plots, examines them, breaks them down for gaming, and shows you ways to run them that aren't just the same old, same old. It's great for any supers game, not just **Champions**.

Excellent! Speaking of plugs . . . what's been going on with Steve Long and the Hero Games crew?

Oh, we've been keeping busy, as always! Between our regular production schedule and all the cool stuff going on with the **Champions Online** MMO, there's plenty to keep us busy. We're just about to ship our latest Champions book, **Shades of Black**, an epic adventure featuring our villain Black Paladin. And in layout we have **Urban Fantasy Hero**, our latest genre book.

So, lots of new stuff, and you're still busy, eh? A wise man once said to me, "The more things change . . ."

Information about Hero Games, the **Hero System RPG**, and **Champions** can be found online at **HeroGames.com**. Details about the **Champions Online** MMO are located at **Champions-Online.com**.



About *GURPS*

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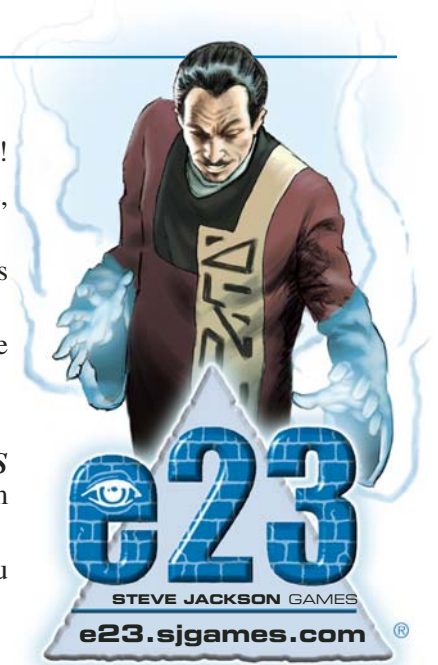
Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata pages for all *GURPS* releases are available on our website – see above.

GURPS rules and statistics in this magazine are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*. Page references that begin with B refer to that book.

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