

Fifth Edition, Revised

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The Review:

Reviewed By Gordon Feiner

The Upside:

The first thing you need to know about the HERO System Rules is that it is not a Game, at least not in the sense of you buy the book, learn the rules and sit down to play the setting provided. First off, there is no provided setting. The rules are without context, the book provides the tools to create the Game you want to play - any genre, any power level. Hero let's you create just about anything your imagination can dream of, but that kind of freedom comes at a price. The HERO System is a tool kit.

In the case of HERO that price is all in up front prep-work. The sheer number of choices available are not for the feint of heart. When you sit down and take a look at the Rule book you'll find that seventy-five percent of the Book is in the setup, and the rest is sitting down to play. I'll break down which Chapters involve more setup, and which are actual Game Play - they aren't presented exactly in order in the book.

Before you even begin to create what you want with Hero however there is one over riding element that drives the System - Reasoning From Effect. In most systems you decide what you want to do and find it in a list somewhere (if at all). In Hero you decide what it is you want to have happen, then work backwards to find exactly the right element to emulate that. You will never find a System Element called "Fireball" instead you decided exactly how your Fireball behaves and choose the System Elements that allow for that effect and put them together to create your Fireball. This means that there may be more than one way to do something, which is the beauty of the system - it's all about the choices.

Chapter One - Character Creation. This is the Prep-Work chapter. All the building blocks of the system are right here. Characteristics, Skills, Perks, Talents, Powers, Modifiers, and Disadvantages are the blocks that create the Game. Characteristics and Skills are similar to every other game out there, the difference is only in the details. Perks and Talents are common elements in other Games under different names. These two items are unique (but mostly believable, or at least heroic) abilities, resources, and game world aspects that the Character has or can draw on - a few examples would be the Money Perk (for rich Characters) and the Bump Of Direction Talent (for those who always know where North is). Powers and Modifiers go hand in hand, these are the elements that are used to build what you have in mind in Mechanical Game Terms.

Powers and Modifiers is the learning curve in the Hero System. All of the elements are presented without context and without Special Effects (fire blast, creating a thunder storm, guns, etc...). Hero is Point Based, so everything in the system costs a Point Value, and years of experience shows that the given values in the book are fairly balanced. Because the book provides no context it instead provides a series of rough guidelines (and when I mean Guidelines, I mean that the GM and Players should rely on their judgement as much as the points), these are Active Points and Real Points. Active Points is a rough idea of how powerful something is, Real Points is what you pay for that Power. The Modifiers come in two flavors, Advantages which raise the Active Point level, and Limitations which lower the Real Point levels. The mix of Powers, Advantages, and Limitation creates exactly (or almost exactly, nothing is perfect after all) what you have in mind.

Disadvantages are the parts of the Character that are personal complications, weaknesses, and other foibles. Every Hero Character is built on Points as I mentioned, those points are divided into two parts - Base Points which are free and Disadvantage Points, which you get for adding Disadvantages to the Character (appropriately enough). These come in the form of things like Psychological Limitations which dictate how the Character will think and react to certain situations, to being Hunted by another person or organization, and many other things that can work against a Character every once in a while. If used properly these become more like Character Plot Hooks that detrimental elements, and go a long way to creating a Hero System Flavor.

All of that is the first three-hundred and forty-six pages of the book, well over half the book is nothing but Creating Your Character. Once you've gone through all that everything your character can do is written down on the Character Sheet, no need to go back and look anything up (most of the time at least). There is one other part of the book that is part of the Set-Up however, though not directly related to the Player Character or NPCs, but is still mostly up-front prep-work before game play.

Chapter Four - Equipment. This Chapter provides the rules for creating Vehicles, Bases, Automatons, and Computers/AIs. It also has a section of pregenerated Weapons And Armor. The rules for Vehicles, Bases and Computers are the same for the Characters, but they have a modified Character Sheet - notably they have less Characteristics, Computers don't have Strength for example, and Vehicles and Bases don't have Intelligence. Otherwise they follow the same Character Creation rules as Characters themselves. Automatons are similar to Characters in many respects, though they have a few Powers that are only allowed by them, this allows GMs to build certain affects without disrupting game balance by allowing everyone else to have access to them (like the ability to Not Bleed). Vehicle Combat is also located in this section of the book, the only Game Play element here.

Moving onto Game play, which is divided into two Chapters. One involving Combat, the other Environmental aspects and threats.

Chapter Two - Combat And Adventuring. This is the chapter that actually describes How To Play using the Hero System. It covers Senses (an important aspect of the System), Combat, Damage, Recovery,

and other game play issues. It's divided nicely into the following sections. Before Combat, covering Non-Combat and Combat Time, and Perceiving Things. Entering Combat, Game Scale, detailing Combat Time, Actions you can take, and Movement. Fighting, Attacking and Combat Maneuvers which add a wide variety to combat itself. Determining Damage, Adding Damage Up (which looks complicated at first, and I won't say it's the easiest aspect of the system, but it is not hard), Taking Damage (HERO divides the attack into two parts: Getting Hit, and Defending Against Damage Taken), and the Effects Of Damage (being Stunned, Knocked Out, Injured, and Killed). Optional Effects Of Damage is an entire suite of rules you can add to the game for more "realism," or other more detailed effects of combat. Likewise Other Combat Effects covers a few less common but still important situations. Recovery goes over healing, and regaining Endurance. Endurance is another important part of Hero, every action costs you Endurance to perform, which means you can only do something for so long before you're tired. Presence Attacks are a special kind of attack that involves force of personality instead of trying to hurt someone.

A lot of people claim Hero Combat is slow. I have never personally found this to be true. Hero Combat takes no more or less time that combat in many other systems. What can slow you down is the sheer number of options at your finger tips - there are dozens of possible Combat Maneuvers you can perform. If anything slows combat down it will be either a lack of familiarity with the system, or taking too long to decide on an action. If you still find Combat slow the book has many options you can use to speed things up to your liking without taking away from the core elements.

Chapter Three - The Environment. This chapter covers all kinds of non-combat issues that Gamers tend to get into. Falling, Environmental Effects (dehydration, starvation, temperature, etc), Living In A Dangerous World (effects of fire, electricity, chemicals, radiation and more), Breaking Things, Concealment, and finally Animals. Animals, it should be noted, are made the exact same way Characters are.

Both chapters are a total of one hundred and eight pages and cover everything you need to know about combat, interacting with the world and other game play issues.

So, what's the rest of the book? Advice. Lots of it.

Chapter Five - Genre By Genre. This entire chapter was added into the Revised Edition of the rules. It takes a look at seven of the most popular genres in detail and how you can apply the Hero System to create a Game in each one. Champions covers Superhero Gaming, the roots of Hero. Cyberpunk Hero, Fantasy Hero, Modern Day Action (Dark Champions), Pulp Hero, and Science Fiction (Star Hero). Each one looks at some guidelines you can use, some common conventions and features, possible sub-genres, and provides a few example Characters to look at. It also very briefly looks at the Horror, Post-Apocalyptic, Swashbuckling, Victorian, and Western Genres of gaming. The HERO System is a universal Tool Kit used best for Genre Simulation, and this looks at the elements used to create the feel (both in game play and that elusive element of "feeling" - how to make the Mechanics feel like they're part of the decided upon Genre.

Chapter Six - Gamemastering Advice. This is just some good solid advice for creating a fun and exciting game. From creating Campaign Guidelines, Stories and Scenarios and other things a GM should keep in mind when running a game, both in general and specific to the Hero System.

Chapter Seven - Changing The System. This is, by a large margin, the single most important chapter in the book. The HERO System is, above all, a mutable platform to work from, but like any codified set of rules sometimes falls short of specific desires. This chapter looks at ways to modify, add to or take away from the basic rules provided to get Exactly what you want.

So when you look at the book remember it's divided into three distinct sections - Creation, Game Play and GM Advice. While I recommend you read the whole thing, several sections can be skipped as you learn, and a large amount of space is given over to examples and optional rules. If you're new you can easily just look past anything labeled Optional until you get more comfortable. And if you can find an experienced Hero Gamer to help you out, even better.

The Downside:

If the Fifth Edition Revised book makes one mistake it's to almost provide too much information at once in a single volume. It simply looks daunting as a single six hundred page book, even if a good chunk of that is Gaming Advice instead of System Rules.

From a simple organizational point of view I would have put Chapter Four right after Chapter One to get all of the creation rules in one spot at the front of the book.

The Otherside:

I won't claim Hero to be a perfect system, or possibly even the best for your needs. Hero is intended primarily for Cinematic Style Gaming, while it can take on just about anything you can imagine it tends to fall back on creating the action of the movies, of comic books, pulp stories, fictional literature and legends. And if someone told you Hero is just for Superheroes, they're wrong.

Once you decide on a Genre, Optional and House Rules, what elements to include or discard, create your Characters and sit down the System itself gets nicely out of your way and let's you get on with the business of Role Playing. As I mentioned at the start, almost all the work is up front, and all of it is in one book. And the book is full of examples to help you along, the side bars are nearly all filled up with ideas, and there are numerous examples throughout the text to help you out as well.

If you want a versatile, multi-genre system that you can modify to your needs and wants without breaking it then I recommend Hero. You can even mix genres easily and hassle free because all elements are built with the same blocks on the same foundation.

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