

Champions

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The Review:

Reviewed By Gordon Feiner

The Upside:

Champions is the Hero System guide to the Superhero Genre, emulating comics from their first days in the late thirties up to modern comics and characters. Unlike previous versions of the system, this Champions is just a guide to running Superpowered Roleplaying Games - and much welcome look at the genre.

One thing to note about this book is that it is jammed packed with information, even most of the side bars in the book margins are full of useful advice.

Chapter One - The Superhero Genre. Opening with a good bit of history and discussion on just what Superhero's are, and how they differed from previous generations of superhuman fictional characters, mainly the adherence to a higher code of morality. And from this the basis of playing a Superhero is presented.

The book goes over the major Comics Book Periods so often used in discussion, with the caveat that there are still many disagreements over what falls in what period, it takes on a generalized look at the four main accepted periods of the Comic Books: Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. Each section starts with a look at the overall feel conveyed by the different eras, how to deal with them in a game and providing common ground for a group to work from. They also cover major types of stories and events (such as the dominance of World War II in the Golden Age, the rising Red Scare in the Silver Age, and so on). At the very least this provides common ground of a group of Players to start from, even if they disagree with the specifics. It's also an excellent short guide for those who don't normally read comics. Some other time frames are touched on at the end of the section, such as Galactic Champions and Fantasy Champions as well as alternate histories and simply transplanting to other periods in history.

Timeline focuses on helping to set up a Superhero Game, what kinds of things to think about and go over. Common knowledge aspects such as how long Superheroes have been around, how many there are in the world, how they are treated by the world, and similar concerns that are important to think about when setting up a Superhero Game. Mood And Meta-Genre covers the aspects of Comedy, Drama, Horror, Romance, and Teen games, and how to use them to best effect, when to switch to a different kind. Sources Of Superpowers covers where superpowers might come from in general terms (mutants, aliens, magic, extra-dimensional energy, genetic manipulation, and several others). As well as the pros and cons of using any and all of the possible origins, or restricting your campaign to just a few or even one; for instance a campaign where all Superhumans gain powers through Psionic Ability,

and no other source, without restricting what kinds of abilities (Superpowers) you can use. The chapter finishes out with a good bit on the Elements Of The Genre, going over the common tropes of secret identities, costumes, nonsensical villainy, days jobs, going to far away places, magic and mysticism, secret societies, and super agencies.

The whole chapter provides an excellent introduction and guide to looking at the underlying aspects of a Superhero Game, whether you've been a comic book fan for decades or have never read a comic in your life there's something here that you can use.

Chapter Two - Superhero Character Creation. Starting with Being Superhuman, a look at how to establish the line between a Superhuman and a Normal human as seen through Characteristics. With Great Power covers the specific origins of a Character's powers, and possible motivations. The next section covers the Mechanics of Superhero games, since this genre is one of, if not the most, open to any idea on what is possible it actually has very little to say here. In essence the entire set of rules is wide open and unrestricted. However, a good chunk of text is given over to Disadvantages for Superheroes and the myriad kinds you can take to expand your character beyond a list of Powers and Skills.

Superhero Archetypes is a large section dedicated to the major archetypes that are often seen in the comics, given the wide open nature of the Genre this section seems to look to restrict creativity. It covers such ideas as The Brick, The Super Patriot, The Gadgeteer, The Energy Projector, and several other archetypical Superhero types. It even includes a Quick Superhuman Generator, a set of tables and prebuilt powers you can use to make a Superhero in about thirty minutes or less (mine took five on a quick run through, I ended up with a passable highly mobile acrobatic Martial Artist).

Superteams is a fairly important section and gets excellent coverage. Since most Games will involve multiple Players, the idea of a Superteam becomes a very important and prominent aspect of a Game. This section covers how teams are formed, how they stay together, choosing a name, and more. One of the best things gone over are the types of personalities seen in a team dynamic, from the Leader Type to the Loner Type (and how to keep them on the team). This short list can be really useful to a group setting up a Campaign and wanting to get a good mix of characters to create an interesting team with.

While much of the Chapter goes over handling Superheroes in the Hero System there is still a ton of advice packed in for anyone running the genre regardless of system being played.

Chapter Three - Superhero Technology. This chapter covers all those wonderful toys. Starting with Bases And Headquarters is goes over how to get one, size of the base, people working there, technology it includes and location (with the pros and cons of just about every possible location). There are three sample bases provided (Urban, Underwater, and Space) and three Base Computers to go with them. Vehicles covers getting around, with several sample write-ups from the basic transport to the cool car. Equipment covers a bunch of gadgets that Superheroes use, while most useful to the Gadgeteer Archetype it contains things just about any superhero would use, such as tracking bugs, communicators, and armored costumes (bullet proof spandex!). That's not all that's here though, for the GM it contains ideas for Super-Restraints, Death Traps, and Doomsday Devices. The chapter is a good list of things that superheroes commonly use in their war against crime.

Chapter Four - Gamemastering Champions. This chapter is the gem of the book. While the first three chapters are excellent at introducing, looking at and playing in the Champions genre this chapter goes to the next level.

Points And Power Levels, at the heart of the Hero System is the number of Character Points you use to

build characters, and the Superhero Genre is the most open ended genre, while the main rules suggest a standard starting point for Starting Superheroes there's no reason to use those. This chapter covers the pros and cons of using high and low point totals as well as the many other considerations that go into a Hero Game, such as Active Points, Damage Classes and many other factors that go into judging a Hero Character's capability. The look at Effectiveness Ceilings and the Rule Of X are excellent guidelines a GM can use to place some restrictions on a game without stifling creativity completely - with a very important point on just when to ignore those rules to allow for something really cool.

Creating And Running The Champions Campaign goes over campaign concepts, story arcs and creating adventures. Starting with a look at the Morality of the game at hand and moving on from there to how positive (or dark) to make the game and the idea of realism with larger than life characters. It looks at the ideas of separating characters (and how to deal with that, both including and not including combat), dealing with Plot Devices and Player tendency to use them all the time, unnecessarily keeping characters out of communication, and dealing with types of superheroes like the indestructible guy and the can't hit me guy. Campaigns And They Age has some very good advice on setting up, running and keeping fresh the campaign being played, noting that sometimes it's just a good idea to step away for a while from a particular campaign and let everyone's creativity recharge.

Creating And Running Episodes covers setting up a story arc. Going with Villains, Plot, Theme, and Subplots and how to mix these elements into a story. Gaming It Out is a short bit that is a short talk on how the story played out on paper when the GM planned it, and what to do when the Players do the completely unexpected. There's also an instant plot generator if you need some ideas to start from. New And Adjusted Rules looks at how to bend the Hero System to better simulate Superheroes, from attacking while covered (someone has a gun trained on you), using characters as weapons, bouncing attacks, and other common events in the comics.

The Care And Feeding Of Disadvantages is a section every genre book should have, for it is a gold mine to the GM on ways to incorporate Character Disadvantages directly into the campaign. This covers handling how many you want (suggesting to raise or lower the Base Points of a Character for less if you like), things NOT to do, and advice on how to work with and use certain common Disadvantages.

Superhero Environments is more things on the theme of New And Adjusted Rules, in fact that information should have gone here. This includes more common Comic Book actions, like stopping moving vehicles (from cars to tidal waves), knocking buildings down, and Superworld Physics. The last piece is especially important as it's a guide for when to ignore things like Reality and Science in the name of Fun and Genre, as well as how the Genre generally treats certain weird things (like shrinking to ant size does not impair movement or strength).

Villains is a good long look at Supervillains, from simple Hoodlums all the way up to Master Villains. Some advice on things to look at when setting up a Super Agency. Fifteen types of Villains that are typically encountered in the genre. Running Supervillains In A Campaign looks at matching the Villains to the Heroes, how powerful to make them, making them a part of the heroes lives and when to have them dramatically return (or not).

NonPlayer Characters looks at the non-villainous NPC. Helpful or otherwise, this covers the many kinds of people that interact with Superheroes. Forty-seven different types of NPCs are looked at (reporters, cops, business owners, etc), covering how they might interact with the Characters. Six different roles are also covered, which are hooks that get the NPCs involved in the Characters lives more directly, and even recurrently. Five of the NPC types have some quick Character Write-ups that can be used in a game, mostly these involve the ones where their stats might become important

(punks, cops, reporters and agents).

Chapter Five - The Champions. This chapter details a team of Superheroes, the Champions Universe own Champions. And several Villains in their Rogues Gallery. The five Heroes are a good look at creating several archetypes to form a solid team. They are Defender (Powered Armor), Ironclad (Alien Brick), Nighthawk (Gadgeteer Martial Artist), Witchcraft (Mystic), and Sapphire (Mutant Energy Projector). It also contains their base and team jet. Seven Villains are written up: Devastator (Powered Armor), Green Dragon (Martial Artist), Icicle (Low Powered Energy Projector), Mechanon (AI Robot/Master Villain), Pulsar (Energy Projector), Tachyon (Teleporter), Talisman (Mystic). A Good group of Villains to get a game off the ground to be sure.

The Downside:

While the section on Superhero Archetypes is good at pointing out the major types of Superhumans you see over and over in the comics, it doesn't do much to show how you can mix and match archetypes for some really interesting character types that defy classification. This makes the genre feel unnecessarily limited.

The Otherside:

This is just a good solid Genre Guide to Superhero Gaming. Chapters One and Four are of use to anyone, regardless of system being used.

Chapter Four especially stands out as the single most useful chapter in the book. Even if you've been gaming Superheroes for the past twenty-five years this is a good book to pick up for ideas, concepts and some just all around good advice.

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