

Ninja Hero

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The Review:

Reviewed By Gordon Feiner

The Upside:

Ninja Hero is a genre book aimed at setting up and running a campaign focused around Martial Arts. While many games feature martial arts to some degree, and in fact it's a classic Archetype listed in Champions, they often simply have the arts as part of the campaign. Ninja Hero brings that to the front, making it the central focus.

Chapter One - The Martial Arts Genre. In the tradition of all of Hero Games Genre Books we start off with a discussion of what a Ninja Hero Campaign is, and it's major elements. In the case of Ninja Hero the book uses five main styles of Martial Arts Campaigns. Realistic, Cinematic, Wuxia, Video Game, and Anime. Each one more outrageous than the previous, and increasing in power level.

A good bit of space is given to elements common to almost all Martial Arts campaigns. A partial list includes Bandits, Battle Auras, Ch'i, Ninja, Old Masters, Revenge, Tournaments, and Unusual Fighting Styles. Metagenres covers including other elements into a Martial Arts game. Comedy, Horror, Mystery, Romance, Social Commentary and Satire, and Tragedy. Each includes how best to include them in a campaign, if they would serve well as a central focus of an ongoing campaign or are good for one or two sessions. Lastly the chapter covers mixing Ninja Hero with other major genres, Champions (Superhero), Cyberpunk, Fantasy, Westerns, Science-Fiction, Pulp and Dark Champions (Modern Action).

If you're not familiar with the common aspects of a Martial Arts centric campaign this chapter is invaluable. If you are familiar the chapter contains several ideas for mixing in other elements, and also contains suggestions on bringing a Martial Arts focus to other types of Campaigns as well.

Chapter Two - Martial Arts Character Creation. This focuses on setting up your Martial Arts character, it works best if you also have The Ultimate Martial Artist from Hero Games as that book also contains many Archetypes appropriate to a Ninja Hero game. Ninja Hero itself provides seven Archetypes common to a Video Game style campaign, and eleven other archetypes appropriate to any Martial Arts game. While having Ultimate Martial Artist for its ideas is useful, the archetypes presented here are enough to help a player create a character for any style of Ninja Hero Campaign. Included in the side bar is information on some famous real world martial artists, which is cool.

Next the chapter goes into the mechanics of creating a character in Hero terms. Starting with Characteristics it presents suggested levels for each of the five game styles listed in Chapter One, and how these can help set the appropriate tone. Skills, Perks, and Talents all get some coverage for

appropriate uses in a Martial Arts campaign. The Powers section contains both a number of suggestions for which Powers are useful for various styles of game as well as example Power Builds for Martial Arts capabilities often seen in the source material. The Disadvantages portion covers several ideas of using them to focus on the Martial aspect of the game.

Putting It All Together is some final thoughts on creating a Martial Artist and how to make one with a unique style or concept from the chapters various elements. Package Deals for the most common character styles that people tend to play is next. They include a Buddhist Warrior-Monk, A Chinese Knight-Errant (for Wuxia campaign specifically), Chinese Master, Kensei (Japanese Sword Saint), Ninja (this is a fairly realistic Ninja package), and Samurai (for Japanese feudal campaigns). They work well in just about any style of genre.

Chapter Three - Combat. Central to a Ninja Hero Campaign, even more so than other genres, is the act of fighting. But Martial Arts lends itself to very colorful fights full of many fancy maneuvers. So the chapter starts out with a section on how to incorporate fast and furious combat, flashy stunts and just plain fighting into Hero Combat. Using fluid descriptions of the action and embellishing things to bring the action to life.

Common Combat Stunts And Tactics covers a lot of the really fancy things we see in movies, especially how to handling Wire-Fu from Wuxia movies. This covers such things as Aerial Combat, Retraining after a sound defeat, Signature Moves, Stare downs and Taunts. This last has some excellent Optional Rules for handling the scene where two characters meet and spend several moments simply staring at each other trying to unnerve the other.

Special Cases, Option Rules covers various elements of Hero Combat and how to embellish them to create the proper feel. There is an optional rule for breaking weapons which is common in the genre, especially when the Character hits so hard with an attack the weapon breaks in the process. One new element that was introduced in this sourcebook is the Contest Of Power, appropriate for games where Ch'i (or energy) Blasts are common and two characters fire at each other, the two beams meet and there's a contest to push your beam to the enemy.

All the optional rules presented, if used with the appropriate flavor and at dramatic moments can enhance the Martial Art Action and really immerse the Players in the feel of the genre.

Chapter Four - Game mastering Ninja Hero. This chapter focuses on setting up the Campaign itself. Starting with power levels and effectiveness ceilings in Hero System terms, there are a few tables with some good guidelines of what each of the five main Genre of a Ninja Hero are. A general look at the realism, morality and tone of the campaign follows.

Probably one of the most useful and important parts of this chapter focuses on the general outlook of the game. From a Chinese, Japanese or American point of view and how each culture treats the protagonists (the Characters) and the general moral tones each culture tends to tell with its martial arts stories.

Running The Campaign provides some overall plots to work with. Six major story arcs, which can be the focus of entire campaigns are presented, divided into five acts, or parts - involving the heroes, the early part, the middle part, the climax, and potential complications that can be used in any part. An instant plot generator is given at the end of the section. Dealing With Disconnects covers conventions common to the genre that don't always translate well into a Role Playing Game (things like letting opponents recover from being Stunned and Last Words of the Dying). A bit covering how to work Character Disadvantages into a game, and how to use them specifically catering to Martial Arts. The Ninja Hero Environment covers creating a world where the heros can break the scenery with a little

more ease than is normal.

Martial Arts Villains and Martial Arts NPCs are the last two sections of the chapter. Both go over common Villain (or NPC) motivations and archetypes that aren't appropriate (or are less appropriate) to the Players. They both have some very good general advice on bringing the NPCs to life and making them more than just targets the Players interact with.

Chapter Five - Sourcebook. The first part of this chapter is a collection of Setting Outlines, one for each of the major genres. Each outline comes with some suggested time periods and locations. They also provide guidelines for the Tone and Setting and Power Levels. The outlines are good, but are mostly an example of putting the previous four chapters together into a whole.

Next is a whole bunch of NPC characters, again presented for each main genre outlined. Since this is Ninja Hero naturally first we get a whole collection of Ninja NPCs. One for each major genre, and six Generic Ninja Write-ups to use in just about any campaign. Each genre gets two more NPCs to use as allies or enemies (Wuxia has three character write-ups). All of them fit their genre well and cover a wide degree of martial concepts. There are also two supernatural monsters for use, a Chinese Vampire and Chinese Ghost. Six magical weapons, good for use in Wuxia and Anime style settings, round out this section.

Four plots seeds are provided at the end of the chapter, all are good quick start adventures, for one or more sessions, to put into an campaign.

Three Appendices close the book. The first is a list of Chinese and Japanese terms and words, good for getting into the feel. The second is a massive list of names for Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai and Vietnamese which is an awesome addition to the book. The last Appendix is a bibliography and filmography, providing a large amount of source material to help you get into the Ninja Hero genres.

The Downside:

One of the things I was hoping to find, and would have fit in Chapter Four, is a section detailing the symbolism of Chinese and Japanese cultures and its importance in telling a story. The scenery in classic Chinese and Japanese tales tells us as much about the characters and the actions around them as the characters themselves do. If you really want to make a Ninja Hero campaign set in Ancient China or Feudal Japan come to life it helps to know what symbols mean what and to introduce them as flavor into the game.

The Settings should have been fully fleshed out instead of outlines and suggestions. One or two complete settings with NPCs, specific periods and events to go with it would have been nice. The outlines are good, but nothing beats a complete setting to help a GM out.

The Otherside:

The book is an solid guide to creating and playing in a game where the central focus is the Martial Arts and their various styles and how they are used. If you want to focus on a Martial Arts campaign (as opposed to simply have some Martial Arts in any old campaign) then this book will be helpful.

You can get the most out of this book, and running the genre, if its coupled with The Ultimate Martial Artist which focuses on the Mechanics of Martial Arts in the Hero System. Even without that the book is well written and a good guide to gaming with Martial Arts. For anyone getting into, or looking for more ideas on, a Martial Arts Campaign Ninja Hero is the book you want.

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