

Dark Champions

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The Review:

Reviewed By Gordon Feiner

The Upside:

Dark Champions is the genre book for Modern Action, Street Supers, Vigilante and associated genres. Mostly it concentrates on Modern Action and other modern genres.

Chapter One - The Dark Champions Genre. The chapter starts out with a discussion on exactly what Dark Champions covers. It goes over subgenres, metagenres and elements that make up most Dark Champions games. Starting with the typical street vigilante style game, and covering all the way to games that include fantastic elements such as Monster Hunter campaigns. While short, it covers a lot of ground and does a good job of explaining the basic elements that make up a Dark Champions game.

Chapter Two - Character Creation. This is the longest chapter in the book, and goes into the details of creating a character to play in a Dark Champions game.

Part One covers the basics of creation going over backgrounds, personalities, and archetypes. You get a good range of advice on building the person you're going to play, including advice on how to play against type and combine various elements of each section.

Once you know who you are and where you came from it's time to get down to the business of spending character points. Part Two is Package Deals, covering suggestions for a range of characters and their associated skills and abilities. Twenty-Three Package deals are provided. There are five Criminal Packages, four Espionage Packages, five Law Enforcement Packages, six Military Packages, and three Miscellaneous Packages. Also included in this section is information on Intelligence Agencies around the world, how they operate and names they use for various sections, which is an immense help to give spies and intelligence agents the right flavor. The Packages fit well with most character levels, and cover from cinematic to realistic versions of various occupations likely to be played.

The characteristics section comes with good advice on how to create a spread of characteristics amongst a group of characters, especially with the standard Heroic Normal Characteristic Maxima in place. It also has advice on how to selectively alter those Maxima to create even more diversity amongst the group.

Skills covers some specific uses in a Dark Champions game. There's advice on using skills while injured, or on broken equipment, as well as expanded modifier tables for many skills. The other piece

of useful information is the Gunsmithing Modifiers table, with time increments to use the skill. Two new elements are introduced, the first is the Parachuting Skill and the second the Expert Skill Enhancer.

Perks provides a number of useful Fringe Benefits for modern gaming. They are Rank Benefits for several organizations and sectors: Business, Criminal, Espionage, Government, Law Enforcement, and Military (broken down by branch of US Military). Also included is a new Perk called Improved Equipment Availability, for use with the Resource Points covered later in the chapter.

Seven new Talents are introduced. Combat Shooting and Combat-Ready both cover actions one takes in combat. Crippling Blow and Deadly Blow are two talents designed to cause even more pain or damage to a target. Evasive is for those characters that are especially good at not getting hit. Hotshot Pilot is for anyone especially good at flying. Rapid Healing is appropriate for more cinematic games.

One new Optional Power is introduced to the game, Piercing. This is a special Power that works in conjunction with Attack Powers to reduce defenses. One new Power Advantage is also introduced, Semi-Armor Piercing, a reduced form of the standard Armor Piercing Advantage.

Disadvantages covers the most appropriate disadvantages for a Dark Champions game. As well as ways of using Advantages that aren't normally associated with this genre, such as Vulnerability.

Super-Skills are a new element introduced in this genre book. Super-Skills are a form of pseudo-power for Heroic characters. They are mostly designed for cinematic type games, though a few are appropriate for more realistic games. They are built like normal Powers, but almost always with many more Limitations than standard Champions level Powers.

The last section of this chapter is Resource Points. This is another new element for Heroic Games. For those times where a greater level of control over resources available to the Characters is useful the Resource Points can be handy. They work as a way for characters to equip themselves for a specific adventure, choosing appropriate gear and the like. The Contacts & Followers Points have the potential to be the one most useful, considering the source material how many contacts are seen once and never again this is a good way to simulate a rotating roster of people a Character has access to from adventure to adventure. Especially if NPCs have a habit of getting killed dramatically in your games.

Chapter Three - Forensics. This is an entire chapter dedicated to gathering, identifying and using forensic data. While it is not completely comprehensive (that's beyond the scope of the book), it is more than good enough to use in a game. It covers how to use various Skills in the system for Forensics, which ones are appropriate when, which ones serve as complimentary skills, and finally a short discussion on how Powers might effect Forensic data and data gathering. If you have a game that focuses on some form a detective work this chapter is an excellent source of information.

Chapter Four - Combat And Adventuring. This chapter focuses on how to treat combat in Dark Champions. The first section covers basic Hero Combat and how it's elements interact with the genre at both a Realistic and Cinematic level, providing some very good advice on how to treat certain elements and mechanics of the system to capture either feel. The next section covers Damage and how it affects the Dark Champions genre, providing both more lethal and less lethal options. One of the more interesting concepts is Adjustable Hit Locations, which can greatly increase the lethality of a game, and turn most gunfights into one-shot one-kill affairs. It also covers handling damage as Mystery Damage, which is more work for the GM, but can add tension to the game on the Players side, enhancing their sense of danger and possible immersion into the genre. Healing damage is also covered, since quick healing isn't normally available in modern genres some useful alternatives are provided to help keep the game flowing and prevent the Characters dying with the same regularity as

goons. The last part of the chapter covers Gunfighting. With options for alternate range modifiers, close quarters combat blow through (thin barriers provide little protection, this is how you can handle that aspect), recoil, reloading and other factors of a firefight from realistic to cinematic.

The optional rules in this chapter can help capture the feel of the gun battles you want to play out. From the quick and dirty to the feats of Hong Kong action stars, from doves flying through churches to all the other trappings you see on the big screen action thrillers.

Chapter Five - Weapons. If you're looking for a comprehensive look at implementing guns in the Hero System, this chapter is it. It starts out with a sidebar discussion on how people will argue endlessly over how to model guns in any game. So inevitably people will disagree with how Dark Champions does it. What I can tell you is that the implementation is internally consistent, which means it's both playable and works well with itself, which is what you really want out of an RPG. It provides a discussion on ammunition sizes, various ammo types, and how to modify ammo, this comes with sixteen pages of Ammo Tables that list damage by type and caliber for easy reference. It also has a separate section on Shotgun ammo. Next is firearms accessories and modifications. Which covers pretty much everything you can add onto or do to a weapon. Then comes a big list of guns and their basic damage, this is another eleven pages of reference tables, grenades are included as well. The final section covers Other Weapons, just in case shooting the enemy isn't preferred. Aside from knives and clubs there is a good section on explosives. Types of explosives, how easy they are to work with, trigger methods, and all the other information you'll need to level a skyscraper or two. Non-lethal weapons also get a mention, from handcuffs to sonic weapons and all the sub dual weapons modern forces use.

Chapter Six - Equipment & Gear. Next is everything else a Dark Champions character uses in their battle against the enemy. First is an important look at how to get stuff in a typical Dark Champions game, from what is appropriate for what settings to how the GM can control the game and prevent it from becoming a simple arms race. There is also a handy prices table, giving prices in suggested ranges rather than set values, after all black market conditions change for most items. Defensive Equipment is up first, with a look at various kinds of armor, and a small section with write-ups for other kinds of protective equipment and combat wear such as gas masks and holsters. Sensory Equipment covers various methods of constructing radios and communications gear in Hero, as well as five different possible ideas for encrypted communications in the Hero System. Also provided are write-ups for various kinds of sight gear (binoculars and night vision goggles to mention two), detectors (bomb detectors, drug detectors, etc), and various surveillance bugs. For games going towards Costumed Vigilantes and approaching Champions in feel there is also a section, with the single most comprehensive Utility Belt write-up I have ever seen (thirty-three gadgets in all). Security devices and Spy Equipment finishes out the chapter, with both real world Spy Gadgets and Movie Spy Gadgets.

Chapter Seven - Dark Champions Adversaries. This is a short chapter on the enemy, divided into three useful sections. First is organized crime. Going over various organizations like The Mafia and Yakuza, how they are structured, what their illegal activities are known to be. Organized mostly by ethnic type as organized criminal organizations tend to do. It also gives information on smaller but no less deadly groups such as street gangs and motorcycle gangs. Other Criminals covers cinematic masterminds (the guys you tend to see in the movies), costumed criminals, robbery crews, and serial killers. The last section covers Terrorist Groups, giving information on twenty-two currently active (as of 2004 when the book was printed) terrorist groups around the world, and six groups that operated in the past but are no longer active. Will all these various kinds of bad guys the Players should never run out of enemies to face off against.

Chapter Eight - The Dark Champions GM. This chapter is divided into three sections, dealing with

setting up and running a Dark Champions game. The first part is Creating A Campaign, starting with character guidelines. Probably the most important part of any campaign is to get the players on board with the tone of the game. A good set of guidelines is a key element, this section covers that nicely. Going over the possible arms race, effectiveness ceilings, normal character maxima, and character growth. Also looked at is Paranormal elements in the game, whether they're real, not present at all or seemingly real until the curtain is pushed back. As well as types of paranormal abilities common in the genre and how to work with and treat them. Next Campaign Tone covers morality of the game, general outlook, realism and the importance of the Characters in the overall game world. Campaign Types and Subjects is covered next, going hand in hand with many of the elements discussed in Chapter One.

Running the Game is next, and is overall more generalized advice on running any RPG, though it does focus examples on Dark Champions genres. It covers plotting, pacing, adventure elements and a random plot generator for those times you need an idea to start things off. Also included is a good section on various ways to use Disadvantages as plot hooks or twists in a game.

The last part is Villains and NPCs. Going over a range of villain qualities, archetypes and motivations. As well as a good discussion on how to use NPCs to spice up the game with a number of archetypes you can use for flavor.

Chapter Nine - Libra. This chapter has two parts. First is a vigilante group called Libra, the second a short collection of adversaries. Libra is a five person organization bent on administering justice in Hudson City (the published Dark Champions setting). They can be easily moved to your own campaign. Their focus can change depending on how you want to use them in your game and the tone of your players. They can be dark adversaries to Players who are more sympathetic with the law, or staunch allies in the Players fight to wipe out crime one criminal at a time. Or they can be competition for your team of Players. The group itself is well built and covers most bases, but does bend towards the cinematic in style.

The second part is five villains; an assassin, a street mercenary, a crime boss, a mercenary with a twist (he hunts people), and another mercenary who prefers large machine guns. They are of various levels and motivations, representing a good cross section of villains you can use to get started in a game.

The Downside:

A lot of new and optional rules are presented, a group has to be careful what they use and don't use in their games. Given the sheer amount of information presented a section with suggestions on which rules to allow and not allow in a list for each sub-genre covered could help prospective GMs set-up their games. But then, the Hero System is about choices, and you have plenty of elements to choose from. And its likely any such lists would cause more controversy than they would solve.

I would have like to see an example of a Paranormal or Monster Hunter style Villain for Dark Champions games that want to include a bit of the weird.

The Otherside:

As a genre book its useful to those looking for information on running particular genre conventions. Chapters one and three are almost completely free of system mechanics and provide information any modern action game could use. Chapter two has useful information for general character creation.

Dark Champions does a good job of presenting the modern action genre and giving suggestions on

how to use the Hero System to create the feel of the genre. The new Perks, Talents and optional rules for gunfights can turn the generic Hero System into a game that feels action oriented and gritty. The new resource points also go a long way to helping with the feel of the genre. Hero Games does an excellent job when representing ways to emulate the genre with this book.

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