

Pulp Hero

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The Review:

Reviewed By Gordon Feiner

The Upside:

Warning: Pulp Hero is a very thick book, this is a longer than normal review.

Pulp Hero is a genre guide to creating Pulp Games. It's important to understand what is meant by Pulp Gaming, as the Pulps from the were a medium on which any genre was printed, from Westerns to Futuristic. For the purposes of this source book the Pulp Era is the 1920s and 1930s, the period between the World Wars (when the Pulps themselves were popular entertainment). Within that period a number of genres can be explored for gaming purposes however. Simply for the sake of a reference point, Pulp Hero declares 1935 to be the Current Year.

Chapter One - The Pulp Genre. The books starts with a discussion of just what the Pulps were; which is a reference to the paper they were printed on, and not the writing. It goes into a history of their rise in popularity and provides some authors and titles that are among the most famous.

The Pulp Genre covers genre tropes and aspects. There are four major aspects of Pulp Gaming defined, Action, Shallow Characters, Melodrama, and Black And White Morality. These four aspects appeared in just about every Pulp printed. The secondary aspects that help define the genre are next, thirty-two genre conventions are looked at, from the Abducted Girl to Weird Science (and many gamers will be happy to know that in much of Pulp fiction Violence Solves Everything). There is also a section regarding the ideas of Sexism and Racism, how to treat it with historical accuracy, or how to use it sparingly or completely ignore it (keeping in mind attitudes in the twenties and thirties were vastly different than they are today).

Pulp Subgenres covers different types of Pulp Games, with a note that they often share so many aspects you can easily switch from one to the other. This makes them less "subgenres" and more different sides of the same idea. It covers Air Adventure, Crimebusting, Detective, Globe Trotting Adventure, and Weird Menace. Meta Genres covers using different styles in the Pulp Game, comedy (used sparingly), Horror (perfect for Occult Adventures), Mystery (practically a requirement in many Pulps), Romance (or the complete lack thereof), and the fact that Tragedy really has no place in Pulp, it's far too optimistic a genre most of the time. Other Genres covers using Pulp Aspects in the other major genres (Champions, Dark Champions, Fantasy, Ninja, Victorian, and Western), and it gives some extra space to Star Hero for sci-fi Pulps.

Using all, or most, of the elements in this chapter one can set up a long running Pulp Game. Especially given some of the universal aspects you can have a story set in the Jungles of Africa tracking down some lost artifact or civilization, and the next story have the group in a Crimefighting story in New York shutting down a madman trying to take over the city! You can also easily bring many of these ideas into other genres, modernizing the Pulp could work well in a less gritty Dark Champions game.

Chapter Two - Pulp History. This chapter is divided into two parts, both covering historical aspects of the 1920s and 1930s. First is a breakdown by year and month of major events around the world. It's divided into Politics And War, Science And Technology, Crime And Punishment, Arts And Entertainment, and Life And Times. It's done in a table format making it easy to reference, each Year is divided into Month and has a General section at the end for things that weren't tied to a specific date. The second part is a brief description of important and famous people from those times.

All this can come in handy when you want some historical facts for a time frame when sending your adventurers out into the world, and for populating it with famous NPCs, which always makes for fun gaming.

Chapter Three - The World Of The Pulp Era. Here we go around the world and get some geographical, political, and historical information on most of the countries that existed in the Pulp Era. Before it goes into each country it covers some other important factors of the world in the 1920s and 1930s. It covers The League Of Nations, the Great Depression, and Colonialism, with advice on how to use each in a Pulp Game. Travel And Transportation covers how people get around; Automobiles, buses, taxis, trains, airplanes and airships, ships, and riding animals. It has some helpful tables for average price ranges and distances from major ports and airports. Communications covers how people got information around the world, from the unreliable mail, to radio, telegram and the newer telephone.

The rest of the chapter is dedicated to the many countries of the era, keeping in mind much of the globe is still unexplored, at least by Western Culture. The United States is a major world power and gets the most space dedicated to it. The Americas covers Canada, Mexico, Central and South America. Europe covers the fourteen most influential countries of the time. Africa is still almost completely Colonial and doesn't have near the number of countries it does today. The Near East covers Turkey, and what is called the Middle East today. South Asia covers India and the numerous islands between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Far East covers the rest of Asia, China getting about as much space as the United States does. Oceania covers Australia and the South Pacific Islands. A short section at the end provides some information on the Poles as well.

And with all that you should be ready to traverse the world in search of adventure. It's important to note that for the purposes of many (but not all) games historical accuracy takes a back seat to Adventurous Fun.

Chapter Four - Character Creation. Before the chapter goes into building a Pulp Hero it provides a short section on the attributes your standard Pulp Hero possesses. This is an excellent guide to the qualities that embody the genre from a Character perspective. There are twenty four Package Deals presented, from the Athlete to the Wild Man. Covering Cops, (ex-)Criminals, Detectives (with five variations in type), Soldiers, and other common Pulp Heros of the time. Also included are Background Package Deals, these much smaller sets of skills can be used to explain why the Soldier might have a few science based skills (Scientific Parents Background), or why the devil-may-care Aviator mingles with the rich (Wealthy Upbringing Background). All of these Packages help define the Characters (as well as help create expectations) and are at the very least excellent places to start or get ideas from if you don't use them.

Characteristics goes into ways to prevent everyone from looking them same from a Characteristics

point of view (everyone buys their stats to the same levels), as well as going into each Characteristic and which archetypes it's most appropriate for. Some important bits covered in Skills include how Criminology works with the technology of the 1920s and 1930s. The importance of Disguise in the Pulps, and Transport Familiarity of the Pulps. The Follower Perk provides some suggestions on the types of Followers common to the genre. The Money Perk also covers the amount of money each level has in Era Dollars. Three new Talents are introduced that are good additions to Pulp games; Animal Friendship (that uncanny knack to get along with the wild), Hot Shot Pilot, and Inspire (good for the Two-Fisted Hero). Disadvantages provides some excellent ideas for Pulp characters' foibles and quirks.

Heroic Talents is the rest of the Chapter. These Talents are built using the Powers section, and represent some of the amazing feats seen in the Pulps, such as the ability to bite through nails (after training your jaw muscles!), the uncanny knack to take in a breath of air just before being pulled underwater, and any number of abilities. It's broken down into Offensive, Defensive, Movement, Sensory, Miscellaneous Abilities, and Psychic Powers (for games including that element). A total of eighty-four Heroic Talents are provided to add color and flavor to your Pulp Hero.

Chapter Five - Pulp Equipment. Pulp Technology starts the chapter, providing a nice big list of what things were invented (or became common) in what years of the Pulp Era, and what technology never exists in this time frame. Weapons, because Pulp Heroes used a lot of them, covers everything from Revolvers to Grenades (such as they were). Pulp Vehicles provides the important stats for a whole bunch of pulp era transportation, for when the Heroes get into a car chase or dog fight.

And then there's Weird Science, because many of the Pulps made up all kinds of stuff in the name of science for their plots. So Pulp Gaming inevitably does the same a lot of the time. It covers the kinds of Weird Science from just improved known technology to making things up whole cloth. How to explain (or not explain) how it works, and using it in a game. After that it provides all kinds of examples of Weird Science to use in your games. Eighteen weapons, two Defensive gadgets, five inventions used to get around, ten Communication and Sensory gadgets, and eight miscellaneous items.

A giant Price List of both mundane and adventuring items ends the chapter, along with a Currency Conversion Chart for 1935. With this chapter you should have no trouble loading up your character with appropriate era equipment, and a few weird gadgets to set them above the rest.

Chapter Six - Gamemastering The Pulps. This chapter covers how to take the first five chapters and turn them into a Pulp Game. Starting with what "Pulp Means" in a series of bits of how to capture the feel of the Pulps in game terms (Pulp means Bold, Perilous, Sinister, Lurid, Idealistic, Energetic, and Hopeful). There's a good piece on how to treat Mystic and Psychic Powers in a Pulp game. And how to treat the Sub-Genres introduced in Chapter One in game terms. Running The Game covers setting up the world, adding NPCs, casting the victims and villains, and all the stuff that goes on behind the GMs screen, from a Pulp Perspective in this case. There's also some very good advice for using the Deduction Skill in a Pulp Game (advice that can be used in any game really). The side bars of this section are peppered with "Advice from the Masters," which are some of the thoughts from the real Pulp Writers of the Era on how they constructed their stories; advice any GM can make use of.

A new concept is introduced for Hero here, Heroic Action Points. These are points that Players get and can use to affect the game world a little in their favor. They're best used when the Player wants to create one of the myriad Amazing Coincidences so common in the Pulps (from finding a working torch and matches to light it, to the guards forgetting to search the Hero before tossing him in the cell).

Environmental Threats covers all those things that Pulp Heroes encounter that hinder them - and create Adventure! Diseases of the times, while not Heroic to get but provide story fodder (your Heroes

need to rush the vaccine/cure somewhere). Quicksand gets a bit of coverage. My favorite is Rope Bridges! a whole section dedicated to using them is provided. And there's a good long section on Traps for when you reach the lost temples, including eight example Trap builds to use.

Pulp Villains covers the important aspect of creating the perfect Pulp Mastermind. From their nature to the motives. Five major Villain Motivations are presented. Along with this is a section on Role Playing the Villain to the best effect. Seven classic Pulp Villain Archetypes are presented, The Crimelord, Cult Leader, Femme Fatale, Fiendish Oriental Mastermind, Mad Scientist, Unscrupulous Industrialist, and the Nazi (not so common in the actual Pulps, but irrevocably part of the modern perception of the Pulps today). The last part covers creating other NPCs for the Characters to interact with.

Chapter Seven - Randall's Raiders. This is the NPC section of the book. It contains a group of Heroes (Randall's Raiders) that the GM can either use as friendly competition for the PCs, or the Player's can use for ideas on how to build a good classic Pulp Hero.

Villains provides five fiends to pit against your Players. A Nazi, a selfish Archaeologist, a Mad Scientist, a Mob Boss, and an Indian Mastermind out to rule the world. Adversaries provides five quick NPC sheets that can be used as thugs, henchmen and other people the Characters interact with (Cop, Cultist, Dacoit, Gangster, and Soldier).

The book doesn't end there though, the last part is a large section of Pulp Slang to add even more color to your game. If you need more information on the Pulp Genre, or want more source material there's a comprehensive Bibliography that includes Pulps themselves, books on the Pulps, and historical references.

The Downside:

There's almost too much focus on running a 1920s-1930s Pulp Game. For running a Buck Rogers style Pulp Game you'll need to get Star Hero as well and use both books. There's also very little space given to Pulp Games before The Great War, on the other hand those almost completely fall into different genres that deserve their own books.

The Otherside:

As a guide to creating a game in the Pulp Genre with a good solid Pulp Feel to it, this book is excellent. And it is useful to anyone wanting to run such a game, in the Hero System or otherwise.

But it doesn't stop it's usefulness there. Superhero Comics evolved almost directly from Pulp Serials, and in fact the early comics shared a lot in plot and writing style. Anyone wanting some more advice on playing Heroic Characters to the hilt in a Superheroic Setting can get good mileage out of the advice in this book. Particularly the Characters chapter - it wouldn't take much to adapt some of the Character Archetypes (Package Deals) to a full fledged Superhero. And GMs can mine the Campaign Chapter for adventure and villain archetype ideas.

Overall this is probably one of the better Genre Books put out, and worth every penny of the cover price. One nice touch on the layout of this book were the numerous quotes from actual Pulps to illustrate points (and the typeface for these was in an old type writer style).

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