
Truth & Justice, a Review

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Price: \$13 PDF, \$25 PoD

Upon the recommendation of a friend who purchased the print version of *Truth & Justice (T&J)*, I bought the PDF (I like PDFs) but was mildly disappointed to find that the version on RPGnow was the second printing and not the third, which my friend had. The second printing errata was only a page and contained nothing critical (unlike my PDF of *Mutants and Masterminds (MnM)* which I downloaded directly from Green Ronin and yet it still contained uncorrected errors, including the costs of some powers). Even so, it is annoying when one of the advantages of purchasing PDFs (up-to-date files) was neglected.

One thing I really like about PDFs is using the search function, which is important for *T&J* because there is no index; however, the table of contents is very thorough and the bookmarks work allowing for quick navigation. Internal page references are not linked to the appropriate pages, however. The PDF was easy to print, though I would have appreciated a wider inside margin to accommodate three-hole punching. The last five of the 134 pages are dedicated to advertising. Overall, the look is typical of a small press game publisher. The black-and-white artwork was of middling quality and fairly generic and uninspiring. The layout and organization could have used some work, as I often have a difficult time finding a particular rule in the printed copy, especially since the critical rules are spread across three chapters: basic mechanics are in Chapter 2, superpowers in Chapter 4, and combat in Chapter 5.

In my eyes, the most important element of a game is its heart. The specific rules are less important than the spirit and attitude behind them. *T&J* steps off on the right foot in Chapter 1 which explains the superhero genre (and its various sub-genres) and how *T&J* addresses it. Over five pages are dedicated to the discussion of various comic book tropes, including a page on costumes. I have often seen gamers forget the conventions of the superhero genre, allowing logic or real-world physics get in the way. There is nothing mechanical in the rules to prevent this, but Chapter 1 is a good reminder of the "mad beautiful ideas" found in comics.

T&J is very much a game of heroics and though the system would work fine with a dark or even villainous tone, the focus of the book is on playing a hero. Death is never accidental in *T&J*; incapacitation is the worse that can happen. Only when the villain explicitly says that they are going to kill a helpless victim will that character die. All wounds heal by the next scene unless time is a critical factor, such as in a chase or a bomb is set to go off. In addition, PCs are rewarded for being heroes and following their heroic motivations and overcoming their limitations. While these concepts are easily adapted to any game, it illustrates the focus *T&J* has

in actually emulating superhero comics and not just gaming superpowered characters.

T&J is based on the same PDQ mechanics Atomic Sock Monkey uses for their other games. The player-defined qualities and powers, which are ranked from Poor (-2) to Master (+6), are added to a 2d6 roll and compared against a target number (typically 5 to 13) or an opposing roll to determine success. The four-point scale (odd values are skipped) will also frustrate some, though I have found that even in systems with a wider scale, PC ranks tend to clump in a narrow range. The basic (non supers) PDQ rules are available for free from the ASM website (www.atomicsockmonkey.com), which also has some free support material, such as a rogues gallery of NPCs, for *T&J*. The system is easy, straight-forward, and highly functional. Gamers who are turned off by the looseness of *Fudge*, *Heroquest*, or *Risus* will be similarly put off by PDQ. There is something to be said about allowing players to define what their characters can do without the game designer restricting them, but there is also something to be said about not requiring the GM to make a judgment call each and every time a player tries to apply a particular ability to a problem.

One of the trickiest aspects of all superhero games is how to define powers, especially "gonzo" powers. While games like *Hero* and *MnM* take a rules-focused approach, *T&J* uses a freeform approach which is both liberating and frustrating. On one hand, *T&J* can accommodate any concept the players can think of. On the other hand, the GM has to deal with every concept the players can think of. With players who have cool, creative, and constructive ideas, this is wonderful. With a player who freezes when given a blank canvas or whose vision of superheros differs substantially from the norm, the GM has a lot of work to do. The process of assigning qualities and powers is so fast that the vast majority of time will be spent on coming up with the concept, origin, and history and not juggling point values or poring over the rules.

T&J is a "high trust" game. Players have to trust the GM not to screw them over and GMs have to trust to players not to make their lives miserable. There are not enough rules to cause the kind of rules lawyering of other supers games, but there are few enough so that an argument does occur, it can really derail things. In many ways, *T&J* is more susceptible to min/maxing than more rigid games. The flip side of this is that it is very easy for a players to make characters with abilities that are not really that useful or which do not fit into the campaign plans. *T&J* requires close player-GM communication and understanding of what the characters' abilities are. With some gaming groups, *T&J* is a recipe for disaster; with others, it can be a very liberating and constructive experience.

When performing an action, a player can use (or suggest to use) any and all qualities and powers which seem to apply. When multiple characters act together, such as in a coordinated attack, they all add any and all qualities and powers to the task. This encourages creativity but it also encourages powergaming in way that

more rigid, defined systems do not (there is no equivalent the power level caps of *MnM*, for example). In play, the players often wanted to do something that disrupted my own suspension of disbelief, placing me in the position of making the game less fun for me or less fun for them. Finding that middle ground without hard-and-fast rules to fall back on can be tough.

Powers at average rank have a +0 modifier. This makes them as effective as anything else the character tries to do. An average fire blast is generally as good as an average (undefined) punch, at least against a super-powered opponent. This is good in that it gives characters more options and they can try things besides using the same old fire blasts. But it is also bad in that someone who has invested in average powers may be frustrated to find that they are no better than someone using an average quality. It depends on the power, of course (average night vision is still better than average perception at night), but a +0 adds nothing when combining attacks with other characters and a +0 leaves no room for sucking up damage and failure ranks. In this respect, *T&J* seems to favor the specialists over the generalists, but it gives generalists plenty of room to be creative.

The rules make no distinction between skilled attacks and powerful ones. In comparison with other systems, "to hit" and "damage" are combined into a single roll. An expert martial artist and someone with expert super-strength roll the same 2d6+4 to hurt their opponents. The advantage to the system is speed and not having to worry about which is a "better build." The disadvantage is that you often lose the tactical and descriptive difference between disparate powers. The resulting blandness must be compensated with good descriptions and I admit that I am not always up to the task. In my example, super-strength adds additional damage if it lands (a special rule for super-strength only), but martial arts could be used for defensive rolls as well. And the guy with an expert fire blast rolls 2d6+4 to hit and must use some other quality to defend. But they all will hit the same opponent just as often, which does not match the dramatic rhythm you might expect. If you want a fight based on agility or strength, finesse versus brute strength, to feel different from a mechanical level, *T&J* may disappoint. If you want something fast where agility and strength are on identical footing, *T&J* will satisfy.

All attacks cause either damage or failure ranks, which reduce the target's qualities and/or powers, as chosen by the target's player. Damage ranks are harder to recover from and can be negated completely by armor (and invulnerability may ignore the attack). Failure ranks represent being tripped, bound, intimidated, tricked, or otherwise inconvenienced. Once a single quality or power is reduced below poor through a combination of damage and failure ranks, the target is defeated. Typically, this means incapacitation, but social defeats may be interpreted differently.

For gamers who prefer effects-based attacks and powers, the use of failure ranks will often feel wrong. Suppose your character shoots sticky webs at an opponent. This will only actually stop opponents if used to reduce the last of their ability ranks. If you use it at the

start of a fight, you will simply do failure ranks. Thus, instead of fully binding the villain, you only slow them down. This is similar to the staking mechanic from the *Buffy* rpg: you have to beat up the vamps a little first to ensure that your stake attempt will drop them. Likewise, there is no such thing as a stun attack. Any "stunning" is simply reflected by failure ranks and does not actually "stun" the opponent in any mechanical sense. Blinding attacks work the same way. This can be rather disconcerting to players who define a power or action to have a very specific effect. However, GMs may appreciate the lack of powers that instantly incapacitate opponents and the lack of specialized rules to deal with specialized effects.

Characters can use literally any quality or power as an attack. In games like *Savage Worlds* and *MnM*, intimidating or taunting an opponent has a specific game effect. In *T&J*, all such attacks result in generic failure ranks. The advantage is that villains can be defeated through non-violent means. The disadvantage is that villains can be taken out by calling them bad names, especially if they have no qualities to defend against social attacks. Some players think this is too cool for words; some find it ridiculous, depending on the circumstances.

When you take a damage or failure rank, you pick which qualities or powers to lower. The very first one you pick (and optionally the very last one you take before you bite the dust) is used to generate a story hook. Creative players will use this as a way to flag the GM about what kinds of subplots they want their heroes to be in and how they want to complicate their characters' lives. Cheesy players will choose boring or inconsequential qualities so as to minimize the effect. Annoying players will always pick a boring quality (often more than once) and let the GM figure out how to make something interesting out of it. Gamers who like to have a direct cause-and-effect for powers and attacks will balk at the notion that taking a punch or being taunted will affect their business savvy or flight power, but one can usually stretch a justification for things.

T&J makes a distinction between normal- and super-scale damage. A gun is normal scale but a gun designed as a super-gadget is super-scale. A laser blast (power) is super-scale and a punch with super-speed is normal scale (there are ways to spend hero points to make it super scale)... I think (the rules are not explicit on cases such as this). Super-scale attacks add extra damage ranks against normal inanimate objects (cars, walls, etc.), but not against people (so that non-powered people are not splattered). Except for super-strength, which does add bonus damage unless you pull your punch. Someone with invulnerability or super-armor can ignore (all or most) normal-scale attacks. Lightning strikes are considered "extraordinary normal-scale physical trauma" (and causes only failure ranks against invulnerability) but a bolt power defined as a lightning is super-scale (and does damage ranks against invulnerability). And there is no big table of objects and their toughness as you find in other systems (leaving the GMs and players free to wing collateral damage). Personally, I find same-scale system like that

in *MnM*, *Hero*, and most other supers games works just fine and is easier to implement.

Like many cinematic rpgs, *T&J* uses hero points and they work much the same as they do in other rpgs. You gain hero points by following your motivation, doing heroic things, being a team player, being hit by a "revolting development" from the GM, or being affected by one of your limitations or vulnerabilities. You spend hero points to boost an ability, get a second wind, find a clue or a contact, or activate a stunt. I think the ebb and flow of hero points is supposed to be fairly fluid with a slow but steady increase in favor of the PCs, but whether or not this is true will depend greatly on your playing style. Villains have their own points too that the GM can use against the PCs, but there are no guidelines about how many they should have (besides the default of 5 used for starting PCs) or how many they should use (rather than burning through all they can to down the heroes), especially given the power of the GM to orchestrate a revolting development.

Stunts are a key feature of *T&J* and they represent tricks that your character do that expand the power to make it more versatile and/or more potent. Want to shoot your sticky webs into the thug's eyes to blind him? Use a stunt. Want a special maneuver that you do not use all the time but totally kicks ass when it does? Buy what is called a signature stunt. Stunts can be used any time and made up on the fly. Signature stunts must be purchased as part of character development and paid for with hero points each time they are used. Characters with "meta-powers" like sorcery or "spider powers" can do practically anything, but each thing must be done as a stunt (usually costing hero points, but costing none of performed at 2 ranks below the rank of their power)... again, I think, because there are not enough examples of how to use stunts with meta-powers.

For the sake of clarity, I shall describe character advancement without using the *T&J* nomenclature. As characters gain hero points, they gain experience points. Experience points are used to buy up qualities and powers, buy new traits, and buy signature stunts. Characters who are heroic and do all the things to gain hero points advance faster. Characters who spend their hero points do not advance more slowly than characters who sit and hoard their hero points. In fact, the maximum hero points you can hold are tied into your current xp level (which can go up or down), so characters who spend most of their xp to advance have smaller potential hero point pools. Lastly, the ratio of hero points to xp (and the speed of advancement) can be fast or slow, depending on the campaign preferences. In either case, campaigns with stingy GMs who do not reward hero points as often or players who do not do the things to earn hero point have a slower rate of advancement than free-wheeling campaigns in which the hero points fly in both directions.

Three sample campaigns are presented. In the first, the PCs are *Second-String Heroes* who take over the care of the city after the primary hero is called away on other business (like Superman leaving to do JLA business and leaving others to defend Metropolis). The second, *Supercorps*, is a corporate heroes for hire set-

ting. The last features the world's very first supers who gain their powers and now must learn what to do with them. While none of the settings are particularly inspiring, they do give the GM fully conceptualized campaigns rather than briefly described campaign concepts.

The chapter on gamemastering gives plenty of good advice, but none of it stood out as revolutionary. There is a welcome emphasis on using the comics cliches and working with the players in character creation and directing the game. All of the advice could apply to any system and much of it applies to any genre. The chapter covers creating settings and adventures, running the game, and playing NPCs. I would liked to have seen a wider variety in the sample NPCs, using them to provide insight on how to build certain types of characters or use specific powers (especially meta-powers) and to show off the flexibility of the system better. The three-page bibliography is a good read and might even point to comics, movies, television shows, and even rpgs that you may have overlooked.

What you get out of *T&J* will greatly depend on your gaming group. If the players and GM communicate and work well as a team, *T&J* works well. The simple system is wide open for interpretation (though there are still some fiddly power rules that have to be memorized) and thus could cause problems if the communication breaks down or the trust was never there. If you want a basic system for playing a superhero having to convert another system and without the overhead (and cost) of more complicated systems and do not need glossy full-color pages to be inspired, you cannot go far wrong with *Truth & Justice*.

Generation Zeta FAQ, Continued.

Zetas and the World

Do zetas run around "wearing their underwear on the outside?"

Generally, zetas who use their powers for good or ill use functional outfits as befits their powers. Leather and kevlar is more common than spandex or bare skin. Some choose to keep their identities a secret, others don't.

What do the police think of superheroes?

The police are still not properly equipped to deal with most zeta-powered criminals. In some ways, they welcome superheroes to deal with these villains, but they can also resent the publicity and admiration they get from the media and the public. In Santa Rita, the police take a "don't ask, don't invite, don't complain" stance on superhero assistance.

Ridgeway Academy

What kind of school is it?

Ridgeway Academy was established in 1962 as a private, non-sectarian preparatory school. It was originally designed as a boarding school, but began accepting day students within the first decade. In 2007 it established a formal policy excluding zetas, following a

national trend among private schools. Though challenged, it succeeded in defending its policy based on issues of safety. In 2021, it began accepting state-funded "voucher students" as a means of bolstering its dropping attendance. However, in doing so, it had to reverse its policy on zetas to be in compliance with California law, and radical changes were made. When the first zeta joined the faculty, one-quarter of the parents pulled their children from the school. When the first zeta students arrived, this increased to one-half the already dwindling student body. Students coming from public schools made up the difference.

What is the composition of the student body?

The student body of 400 is broadly divided into three groups: the old guard, the vouchers, and the zetas. The old guard consists of students who still see the school as theirs and resent the presence of the other two groups. Though none attended Ridgeway before the changes, their siblings and parents foster their resentful attitude. Most of the students who attended public schools are grateful to be attending Ridgeway and see it as a step up from their previous situations. However, while a normal high school might have one or two zetas, Ridgeway has a dozen or more, not counting faculty, so there is tension between these two groups.

The dormitory, which used to be divided among gender lines, as now been reassigned with the zeta students taking half and the two dozen old guard boarding students taking the other half.

Comments on Issue #374

Paul Cardwell

Thanks for setting me straight on olde tyme radios.

Since broadcasters lease the public airwaves, I think they should be required to provide free airtime to political candidates. This will eliminate the single greatest driver in the cost of campaigning. Done correctly, we might even start seeing some alternative views and candidates.

No one today knows how to counter a longbow? What about modern armor¹ and artillery? Or do you mean using technology equivalent to that of the longbow?

Myles Corcoran

If I were to play *Exalted*, I would probably use *BE-SM*. Given its crunchy powergaming goodness, it seems like a good fit for the *Hero* system and its fans.

Movies are often a very bad model for rpgs. Ever notice how planning scenes in heist movies tend to jump straight to showing the plan without ever showing the hours of thinking, debating, etc. that went into creating the plan? They show the preparation, but you rarely see the characters arguing over the merits of a plan and its alternatives. A scriptwriter might have spent months working out the heist details; players do not have that option.

¹ You know, tanks.

D&D is "often about balancing encounters," but it is also about playing in a simulated fantasy world. This is supported in the rules by its choice of classes, abilities, spells, etc. as well as all the campaign material ever published, including adventures. So when you randomly encounter five bugbears on patrol (which requires not only being at the right place, but also being there at the right time), you might very well ask where they came from and then eventually find the rest of their clan. If you did not stumble across them earlier, those five bugbears will inevitably show up later.

Spike U Jones

Had I known there would be a two-and-a-half hour line for the OOTS items, I would not have sent Terri to get them. Rather than call me and tell me what a unreasonable task it was, she toughed it out, because that's the kind of gal she is. I certainly would have told her to skip it had I known.

Lisa Padol

Spells are important to provide a framework to know what is possible with magic. Even in a freeform magic system, spells can represent those applications which are common and well practiced. *Ars Magica* does this well.

I have seen players take great pleasure in having their characters act contrary to their best interest or the interest of the rest of the party. Negative attention is just as entertaining for these players as positive attention. Getting themselves and others in hot water brings giggles of joy to these players.

You may be right about indie folks reacting against obnoxious drama queens. I would add obnoxious GMs to that as well. The indie focus on balancing narrative power and control is very suspicious. If you distrust your fellow players so much that you have solve issues of communication and social interaction into game mechanics, why would I want to play anything with you?

You are correct, it does feel like a movie, but it is one of those movies in which the main characters must not do the smart thing (delay the expedition) to progress the plot. Also, they are just sitting ducks for the next bad thing out of their control to happen to them. While it may be fun to watch, it is not fun to play.

Brian Rogers

Baby Building sounds similar to various monster= and robot-building card games I have seen. Most of those suffer from poor gameplay; if you can make the strategy and tactics compelling and get it to market, a slight game of theme might be in order.

Mechanically, the D&D bard's ability to provide bonuses requires the player to simply say "I use Inspire Confidence." Unless a player actively tries to step into the limelight, it can be an awfully boring ability.

I do not own *PTA*. Also, the players tend to be focused on rules and starting with one system and switching to another would not fly.