
Superhero Opponents

The great comments and feedback I've received regarding challenging superheroes sparked further thoughts on how to challenge superheroes or let them shine with the appropriate opponents.

Letting the Hero Kick Ass

A large part of the appeal of superheroes is in seeing them triumph and doing what they do best, whether it's pounding bad guys to the ground, emerging from the shadows to deliver a debilitating blow, or using speed and agility to subdue the forces of evil. Superheroes should be given a chance to clearly demonstrate their superior abilities by easily taking down unnamed opponents. In a street-level game, these may be crooks and gangbangers, while in a global game, these may be armored assault drones, but the point is the same: kick ass.

This can also apply to minor supervillains, especially those that share a power or shtick with the hero. In comics, the title characters are often the world's best or most powerful something-or-other. The only way to show that, of course, is to pit them against someone who is the world's second-best.

Non-combat abilities are important too. Heroes should be given the chance to show off in their area of expertise, whether it be in investigation, technology, or their personal charms. Especially for less-than-critical scenes, the GM can remove uncertainty and suspense (dice) and just let the players describe how awesome their characters are.

Kicking the Hero's Ass

A hero who always wins tends to be boring. Heroes need to overcome adversity, to push themselves beyond their limits, and to do what was impossible only moments before. In (some versions of) the monomyth, death and rebirth is a critical step, which you can't have unless the hero isn't defeated at least once.

And players need to understand this as well. Too often, I get the sense that players just will accept defeat, not even if it is a temporary setback. This is less true, I'm guessing, of those who play "story games" (as opposed to traditional rpgs). I have seen the problem with classic gamers who are not well versed in the story elements of comic book superheros.

Direct Challenges

It is good to have one or a few villains whose powers somewhat resemble the hero's. If the hero is strong, then being directly challenged with strength gives the hero a chance to shine and prove who's the strongest. The world's best martial artist may have to face many challengers to that title over the course of a campaign. Some heroes are more versatile and lack a

singular key power, but having them face off a similarly versatile villain, perhaps with the same theme (shapeshifter vs. shapeshifter, battle suit vs. battle suit, etc.), can make for a good, dramatic, character-building storyline.

The direct challenge can be more powerful than the hero; this gives the hero a target to strive for. But there is a danger here if the player's expectation is that the hero is the "the best." Plus, it can lead to ever-increasing power escalation that leads to boring character advancement.

Indirect Challenges

Of course, you shouldn't always try to fight fire with fire. Sometimes you should try some water. Or sand. Challenging heroes outside their wheelhouse is a good way to keep things interesting and to keep them on their toes.

An indirect challenge hits the heroes where they are weakest, targets areas outside their wheelhouse, and utilizes tactics that may be seen as unfair. Using magic against Superman, sending a mob of crazed anti-mutant civilians against the X-Men, threatening Spiderman's family, or using yellow against the Green Lantern are all indirect challenges. These are very good at testing the hero without having to escalate the power level. It gives the villain to say things like, "See how easily I can bring even the strongest hero to his knees?"

The GM should take care not to overuse indirect challenges so as not to alienate or frustrate players. People want to see the Hulk smash things, so having him face too many problems that can't be smashed leads to disinterest or even disgust.

Nemesis

A hero's nemesis can be very similar to the hero or wildly different. Superman versus Lex Luthor is a case of brawn, speed, myriad of powers, and intelligence against money, influence, technology, and intelligence. Green Lantern and Sinestro have the exact same powers, just with different colors. A nemesis should be at least equal in power to the hero, but having a more powerful nemesis makes for a true test of the hero's mettle.

In Conclusion

The moral of the story is to mix things up. Set them up to win. Set them up to lose (for now). Let them show off their abilities. Make them reach outside their abilities. Focus on their strengths. Focus on their weaknesses. Make things easy. Make things hard. But most of all, make things interesting and entertaining.

Roleplaying and Mechanics

When I said that good roleplayers don't need mechanics, it was in the context of building external game mechanics around internal character choices. It was not a condemnation of all game mechanics. Nor was it suggesting there was no value in having mechanics. And I was certainly not implying that those who use mechanics are not good roleplayers.

You ever play with someone who wasn't very good? Their idea of a good story was either flat or over the top and what they had their character not only hurt the story, but simply made it impossible to enjoy the game? That's how I feel about dice right now. I just don't trust them to make good choices regarding my character. As a GM, I don't mind them so much because I have less personal investment in how NPCs are portrayed in the story. But as a player, giving up some control to a random element hasn't been working out for me lately.

It's bad enough when I use them for physical-based rolls and I fail a 50% check 5 times in a row which makes my character look like an incompetent jackass. But if that happens when my character is making a psychological-, morality-, or personality-based roll, then the dice have re-written the persona I created. This is not to say that the dice can't sometimes make great decisions and come up with character elements that tell a great story. But I can't count on them to make the right choices, to succeed or fail in such a way that it makes the game fun. I can't trust them with my baby. This is also not to say that I make the best choices, even most of the time. But when I screw up, I can learn from it and try better next time. Dice don't have memory and don't give a shit how much they fuck up your character or your game.¹

As I have said before, dice are a great tool. Dice allow the GM (or players) to offload some decisions so that more brain power can be applied to other elements of the game.² Dice (or cards) can inject new ideas and spark creativity. With diceless mechanics, the decisions are being handed off to a methodology devised by the game designer. They require more brain power than dice, but they do lessen the load over completely freeform gaming. Having game mechanics to fall back on are a good thing, but they can also get in the way and make things harder. At the end of the day, I prefer to leave roleplaying decisions to the roleplayers rather than the dice or game designer.

I've felt like I've said this so many times that I must be boring you all with the repetition. I'm certainly willing to discuss this further, but I'm also willing to just let it drop at this point.

1 Obviously, the restraining order is still in effect.
2 This analogy brought to you by my current work with TCP Offload NICs.

Comments on Issue #395

Ty Beard

Since you neglected to respond to my questions and inquires regarding actual gaming topics in past issues, I felt no obligation to respond to your political questions. I'm simply not interested.

There is an important lesson you have to learn when discussing issues with people in an APA, on an online forum, via email, or even face-to-face. Just because someone doesn't answer a question or actively disagree with you, it does not mean that they agree with you, that your position is correct, or that you have "won" the argument. It could very well be that they did not read it; or perhaps they ran out of time or space and had to leave their comments to you on the cutting room floor; or maybe they felt they were being baited and/or being sucked into a straw man argument; or they grew tired of feeding a troll; or they had long given up any hope of having a friendly discussion that did not devolve into a multi-paragraph rant in teeny font in response to a throw-away, one-line, snarky comment and told "I suggest you learn something about this topic before opining on it again."³

Robert A. Dushay

If you remove the silly cliché combat combinations (3D Ninja vs. 4D Hair Dresser), I don't see why Risus couldn't be played straight. It is very similar to OTE and PDQ, both non-comedic games.

Nor do I see why you should worry about creating a fictional feudal society that might offend modern democratic sensibilities. Historical games have to face these types of issues all the time. I know that Pendragon in particular has always had to grapple the role of women. But even in modern times, there are slew of issues like racism, classism, homophobia, etc. that should offend modern democratic sensibilities. Really, it's just a question of how much you bring these issues to the forefront of the campaign.

Lee Gold

Using an abstract notion like "tech level" can be tricky when dealing with medicine. For example, using good hygiene, sterilizing instruments, and not using bad practices (like bloodletting⁴) can all be done at very low tech levels and provide survival and healing rates that are much higher than our own history experienced. Sometimes "tech level" isn't so much about the gadgets used as knowledge of best practices, which theoretically, can happen at any time in history.

I do think there can be a limit to how many times modern medicine can be applied to a specific injury or condition. A finger can only be broken and mended so

3 Which I took to mean "be quiet."

4 Yes, I know it is useful or even medically necessary in some cases, but bear with me.

many times before the bone and surrounding tissue are permanently impaired. Antibiotics can lose their effectiveness and scar tissue can build up. And as you noted, side-effects can take their toll as well.

In *Savage Worlds*, it doesn't matter if you're reciting memorized eldritch formulas to shoot sparks from your fingers, praying and opening yourself to a divine being to strike down your enemy with a pillar of flame, or channeling your own personal chi through your hands, a Bolt power still works the same (requiring a skill roll to cast and hit), costs the same power points, etc. In AD&D, clerics, druids, magic-users, and illusionists all use the same basic mechanics for casting spells yet the specific spells often work in different ways.⁵ There are some mechanical differences in how they learn new spells, whether they need spell books, etc, but the underlying mechanics are the same. Psionics provided both different mechanics and different effects. In *Hero*, an Energy Blast can be used to represent any number of magical effects and with the appropriate modifiers, any number of "different ways to work magic" though the base mechanics are the same.

Spike Y Jones

It should not come as any surprise that I might disagree with the wording of a piece of political propaganda written over two centuries ago, when slavery was legal, women had few rights, and evolution through natural selection was unknown. I still support the spirit of the sentiment, however, and that's what I think is important.

A&E is a for-profit enterprise. Lee has to balance the revenue earned by allowing lengthy, if off-topic, contributions versus revenue lost by those who leave because of those contributions. I know that contributors have left because of flame wars in the past, I don't know how many readers have left recently or will soon.

Louis La Mancusa

As Will Rogers said, "Communism is like prohibition, it's a good idea but it won't work." But then, I think the same thing about "let the market sort it out." I do make a distinction between communism as a concept and the Communist political parties and totalitarian regimes of various countries. I should have used a lower-case letter c instead of the capitalized word. Maybe that would have eased your consternation. And if you got so bent out of shape by that jest,⁶ I'd better not dare attempt to write a joke in my zine. I'd hate to trigger another rant.

And speaking of being overly sensitive, did you purposely exclude young women when you told us to recall who fought wars?

Lisa Padol

I have often used animals as PCs in the convention games I run. You may remember the family dog from *The Buerger Family Vacation OTE* game. I have run a game where all the PCs were wizards' familiars, I have run *Bunnies & Burrows*, and most recently I had *Woolly* in *Against The Night Things*. If given the choice in the *Abduction* game, I probably would have picked *Scamps*. I don't understand people who refuse to play animals. But then, I don't understand people who refuse to play cross-gender characters, either.

Of the 172 roleplaying games at *Kubacon*, 35 were eight hours long, 52 were six, and of the 74 four-hour games, 44 were run by the RPGA.

The original intent of the *CoC* game was to have the PCs escape after disrupting the elder god summoning ritual near the end of the 8-hour game slot. I suspect that Leon sensed it wasn't going well and decided to let the game end rather than force it along further. I did that once with a convention *CoC* game and though I continue to feel badly about it, I still think it was the right choice.

Your assumptions about Olger not being obligated to selling out the other PCs are correct. I was just giving the player explicit permission to if an opportunity or necessity arose.

Pum

One problem with including red herring plot hooks is that they don't go anywhere. If the campaign were a television series, the red herrings might very well be edited out as superfluous scenes. While some can exist for the sake of adding flavor and maybe a brief-yet-interesting character moment, they can really throw off the pacing.

Brian Rogers

You make an interesting point about players who try to weasel around the rules as breaking their word to you. I have no doubt that some players do this purposefully, trying to get one over on the GM.

I now understand that Accuracy vs. Frequency (vs. Potency, etc.) is a matter of perception. It's related to why I don't like giving fast-but-weak and strong-but-slow attacks the same roll in combat (as they do in *Truth & Justice* or *nWoD*). But do suggest avoiding the trap of having too many axes.

⁵ Such as *Cause Light Wounds* vs. *Shocking Grasp*.

⁶ Did you see the smiley?