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The Cast of the Misplaced Magician

During the course of translating this adventure from a game I ran to something other people can run, I came across some major plot holes. As the GM, I was able to gloss over them and keep the action moving along so that the players didn't ponder them too much. But when you write it out for other people to run, it is too glaring and certainly not worthy of publishing.

The biggest hole is that to maintain one element of the mystery—the real-life identity of the misplaced magician, his assistants shouldn't tell the PCs where he lives. Once they know that, they can immediately put two-and-two together and the surprise reveal later in the adventure isn't surprise any more. I've tried to think of legitimate reasons why the NPCs would either not know or simply not say, but they are pretty forced. Sure, I could remove this element entirely and/or not worry about the spoiled surprise, but much of the charm comes from this element.

The second hole is one one timing. The PCs are invested to find the magician, so to throw them in the action from the beginning, it is best to have them be at the show. But events following the disappearance would take too much time before the PCs would catch up with the magician. Having the PCs investigate the next day solves this problem, but also makes the opening scene of the adventure less interesting, in my opinion.

I've seriously debated whether or not to write up the adventure as I had promised. Rather than publish it here, I will email to anyone who drops me a line.

Super System Omega

Design Goals

My goals in designing the game are as follows:

- **Superhero action.** The rules will reinforce some of the traditional elements of superhero comics, movies, and television shows. But the players and GM must still support the genre through their roleplaying and scenarios. Some examples of genre conventions:
 - › Characters only die when the players say so.
 - › One-shot “kills” are great for minions, but suck for PCs (and named NPCs). And though they do happen in comics, they usually have a purpose such as capturing the heroes or letting a mysterious figure get away.
 - › A fight with a speedster should play out very differently than a fight with a brick. And yet both should be equally effective and interesting in their own unique ways. This also applies to other archetypes: martial artists, etc.
 - › Even “normal humans” have extraordinary abilities. Wildcat and Batman can play alongside

Wonder Woman and Superman and hold their own.¹ This means, for example, that a trained martial artist can have a punch that has the same oomph as an energy blast. However, the campaign guidelines can limit the power rank of so-called “normal humans.”

- › Minions are pushovers, villains get away, and heroes often have to lose before they can win.
- **Traditional roleplaying.** SSΩ is a traditional rpg with a GM and players. It uses action-based dice mechanics with some meta-points to control dice and scenes, not unlike Cinematic Unisystem or Mutants & Masterminds.
- **Structured freeform.** Give the GM and players just enough rules to fall back on and provide plenty of guidance. There are pre-defined abilities, but powers are defined less by the rules and more by the descriptions of the players and GM.
- **Intuitive.** Questions such as “How do I define this power?” and “Can my character do this?” can be answered quickly on the fly. Obviously, *intuitive* is subjective, but I hope my writing will make the system clear and easy to implement. To me, this goal also implies an easy, unified, consistent system that is fairly abstract with flavor added by players.
- **Don't sweat the details.** There will be no fiddly modifiers. Abilities will have only a few ranks (no more than 10). Character creation will be as painless as possible, with a nod to balance, but will leave it mostly to the players and GM to be reasonable.
- **Variable, hard scaling.** There will be an upper limit to ability ranks, based on the campaign setting. For example, the strongest character (PC or NPC) will have Super-Strength of rank 5, the fastest would have rank 5 Super-Speed. The system doesn't care how much weight-lifting capability or mph that translates to, though. A sample, default scale will be provided, but the GM can change it for street- or cosmic-level campaigns.
- **Naturalistic units.** The units for range, area, weight, etc. use examples, rather than meters, pounds, etc. Measurements are meant to be approximate and “squishy,” not hard-and-fast.
- **Hero points are handy.** I know they aren't for everybody, but they make certain things (like dramatic editing) much easier than more convoluted mechanics. This isn't really a design goal, per se, but I always assume it'll be part of the system.

System Basics

Character abilities are rated on a scale from 0 to 5. I could use a larger scale, but this is one I'm comfortable with. A superhero game doesn't need super-high numbers.

Typically, the rank number is used as a bonus to a 2d6 roll and compared against a comparable roll from an opposing character, but this is not always the case. For example, for the Immunity power, the power rank indicates that types of attacks you are

1 Marvelphiles can insert their own examples.

immune to:

Rank	Attack Immunity
0	Immune to one uncommon attack or condition (disease, aging, space, extreme heat or cold, etc.)
1	Immune to multiple uncommon attacks or conditions.
2	Immune to one common attack type or source (dazzle, electricity, fire, power drain, telepathy, magic, etc.)
3	Immune to all physical, energy, or mental attacks (pick one).
4	Immune to physical, energy, and/or mental attacks (pick two).
5	All but one reasonably common attack type or source (fire, electricity, power drain, telepathy, magic, etc.)
Ω	You cannot be harmed except by one very specific attack that represents your Achilles Heel.

Notice that as far as power ranks go, Immunity is insanely cheap. For the cost of getting 4 ranks of armor, you could simply be immune to any attack that might go up against armor. The game is unbalanced.

And I don't care. The common solution is to create a fiddly set of rules to regulate the costs of powers. But I have no interest in doing that. It is up to players to regulate themselves and GMs to coordinate character creation and the campaign so that balance isn't an issue. Because I'm not doing it.

Ignorable Theme for Issue #407

Dodging

In comic books, there are many heroes who would be dead meat if not for their ability to dodge attacks. I'm thinking specifically of most of the Bat-based heroes (Batman, Robin, Nightwing, Batgirl, et al) since I am most familiar with those. By moving quickly and decisively, they can turn what should have been a solid hit into a glancing blow or even a complete miss. This is not about superspeed, but simply not being where the guns are pointed, advancing to change the angle of the shot, and using the environment for cover. You also see the same kind of thing in pulp crime fighters² and modern action heroes (who also now have the ability to outrun explosions).

Many, if not most traditional games, have two types of "dodge" available to characters. The first could be called "passive dodge" but really, it's just the default defensive score needed to hit someone because they aren't going to be standing around waiting to be hit. In D&D, this is your AC. In Hero, it's your DCV. In Savage World's, it's your Parry³. You'll notice that this "dodge" value can include other

things besides, "dodging." If the attack roll is sufficiently good to beat the dodge value, the attack hits and the next step is to determine damage.

The second type of dodge is an "active dodge" or putting extra effort in not being hit. These "total defense" options typically add a bonus to the default dodge value. D&D 3.5 has both "fighting defensively" which adds +2 to AC and allows an attack at -4. It also has "Total Defense" which adds +4 to AC, but precludes making any attack.

Many roll-under systems, like BRP, are slightly different because the "default dodge" is to hope the attack roll fails and rarely has anything to do with the defender's ability. If the attack roll is successful, then you can make a dodge (or parry) roll, but you're usually limited to how many of those you can make per round. If the dodge roll succeeds, the attack misses. If not, then it's off to figuring out damage. Actively dodging may add a bonus to any dodge rolls or it might not be addressed in the system at all.

In the classic Marvel Super Heroes (MSH) game, there was no (what I have been calling) default dodge and only an active dodge. Spider-Man was as easy to hit as Aunt May, unless he spent his action dodging.

In Hero, the typical method of making a character who was good at dodging was to buy up their DCV, making them harder to hit. This makes sense. But it was also suggested (in Dark Champions?) that one could buy up Physical and Energy Defense (analogous to armor) and *saying* it due to dodging, not stopping the attack. On one hand, I can't fault this approach as it is not unlike the player-defined traits you find in many games. It also prevented the "paper ninja" phenomena where it only took one (unlikely) hit to take down a character.⁴ On the other hand, it is counter-intuitive and non-obvious. It also means that someone with a good dodge is exactly the same (mechanically) as someone with good armor, which is far from ideal, in my mind.

Savage Worlds is weird in that while melee attacks use the defender's Parry score as a target number, ranged attacks (except those at point blank) use a static target number of 4. And while taking the Total Defense action adds +2 to Parry, it doesn't help against ranged attacks at all. For that, you must purchase the Dodge Edge.

Comments on Issue #406

Paul Cardwell

You can still market your Nuclear Winter game even if it doesn't jive with our history. How is this any different than a game that proposes a zombie apocalypse? Just declare that President Reagan wasn't kidding when he said that he had "signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes." Everything past August 11, 1984

2 And you could certainly consider the original Batman, appearing in *Detective Comics* #27, in that lot.
3 Based on their Fighting with bonuses from shields and certain weapons, such as staves.

4 One could argue that this isn't a problem and in genre for quick-but-frail characters. I've read comments that this is a flaw of Cinematic Unistystem used in Buffy, but I didn't really see it in play.

becomes alt-history.

Michael Cule

The ~~comic~~ graphic novel you recommended to Paul was probably *Transmetropolitan*.

Robert A. Dushay

Regarding your comments to Spike, I think that society has been more thoroughly undermined by central air conditioning. It made it better to be inside, isolated from one's neighbors than outside, suffering the summer heat and humidity as a community.

Lee Gold

My zine got shrunk again.

Spike Y Jones

Your comments on xp, the Sleep spell, and butchery prompts me to suggest Lore Sjöberg's great description of the Sleep spell in his rating of First Level D&D spells.⁵ He suggests that it should be called "Create Slaughterhouse."

Lisa Padol

How is OTE less boring than Fudge? This is not a snide question or critical comment; I really want to know.

I think GMs can and should run interesting scenarios that some may find offensive. All it takes is a disclaimer and a good game description. A GM who would write, but not run, such a scenario is a coward. But then, I'm a heartless bastard who doesn't understand what people *not personally connected to 9/11* find so heart-wrenching about it.

The AD&D Barbarian as described in *Unearthed Arcana* included the following abilities: climb cliffs and trees, hide in natural surroundings, leaping and springing, survival, first aid, outdoor craft, tracking, animal handling, horsemanship, long distance signaling, and running. None of this sounds particularly "viking" to me. But the book also describes how to tailor barbarians to different regions of Greyhawk, such as nomadic tribes, jungle dwellers, as well as those of the "Scandinavian/Slavic mold."

When I was developing *The Case of Misplaced Magician*, I specifically wanted to use the cliché of investigators interrupting the cultists' climatic ritual.

Eugene Reynolds

Captain "Tightpants" Malcolm "Mal" Reynolds also knew how to take a beating. Captain Picard was particularly skilled at being mind-fucked (perhaps because he left the "get beaten up" to Worf).

Brian Rogers

RAE Comic Book Plotting. Given that a single game session can take up multiple issues of a comic, especially with modern, decompressed comics, I'm not sure how well it translates to the game table.

Recently in my *Monster Hunters* campaign, an NPC

made a critical roll that banished the monster. I immediately apologized, but my players' retort was "that's why we brought him along!"

You say the 2d12 damage limit in V&V d20 is "part of the world." What other decisions are shaped by the world? What types of superhero comics and worlds will not work for V&V d20?

As both a player and a GM, I believe that everyone should **not** be able to build the PC they want to play. It is entirely possible that the PC they want to play will make the game less fun. The PC they want to play must be something that works for the game, the setting, the tone, the overall campaign, etc. If the PC does work, then the rules should let them build it.

If I have a generic skill at 65%, I can accept that the dice may decide they hate me and make me fail more than 35% of the time. But if the skill is called "kick your ass," and the dice decide that I shall kick no one's ass, then it grates. Having a skill called "I'm the goddamned Batman" only makes sense at 100%.

My comment about personal trainers was only meant to give encouragement to look for alternatives rather than paying "14 times the cost of gym membership" and not having to buy a 6 month contract. This is definitely not how it works at the YMCA where my wife works.

My experience with Marvel comics is mostly through television and movies, so I am not familiar with established canon for Johnny Storm or Magneto. However, your system fails to take your examples into account. Bullets would be against Melee defense, right? So, if Johnny's player buys Melee defense, it also provides protection against Hulk punches and Wolverine claws, which doesn't feel right to me. And you only have a single category for "Temperature" so you can't represent Magneto's vulnerability to heat but not cold.

In your martial arts example, let me see if I have the math right. Level 1 hero versus Level 1 shlub. Hero has 15 Agi (+2), Potency B HTH (+8), and -3 for using an unarmed attack = +7. That's +35% from the base 50% to hit on the level comparison. Total to hit chance = 85%. A power-blaster would have a 100% chance. The martial artist would have to be 4th level to achieve that.

The fact that trained heroes have that HTH skill and amateurs don't achieves the effect you want; I don't see the point of having the -3. The problem with Hero is that it makes buying DEX a better deal than simply buying up OCV directly. Your HTH skill is like buying OCV (and damage) directly, but your Agi is much harder to increase. So, no need for the -3.

Steven D Warble

A Revised Edition of OVA is under development. The developer's blog is at <http://ovarpb.blogspot.com/> I'll probably pick it up when it becomes available.

5 <http://www.hulu.com/watch/52985/wired-dd-spells>