

## Kublacon

I went up to Kublacon for Friday and Saturday only this year. There was a family gathering on Sunday and there was not enough in Kublacon's published schedule for me to make an excuse not to show up. One announcement I read said there were over 1900 attendees. Since I spent most of my time in rpg rooms with only 7 people, it is really difficult for me to gauge how these were split among card games, miniatures, rpgs, etc. DunDraCon is more rpg-oriented and so I think the organizers made a conscious decision to cater to card and miniatures players.

I played in two Todd Furler games, one Buffy and one Unknown Armies. Both were fun. UA got me thinking that it might be better served by a diceless game system, perhaps one using resource management. I also spent time with Todd and others from his games during the down-times in the morning and afternoon.

My SAS game went well, but it almost did not happen. Of 7 player slots, I only had 3 sign-ups and only 1 of them showed. Fortunately, he was a veteran of the two previous scenarios and enthusiastically recruited players (a task I am woefully ill-suited to perform). Even so, I learned three important lessons:

- ◆ I should not write my game description too early. I was not quite sure what I wanted to do when I submitted the game and so my description came out rather bland.
- ◆ I have little ability to predict what the players will do. They act cautious when I expect them to act heroically, and visa-versa, and they easily thwart my villain's plans unless I do some serious "black box" manipulations.
- ◆ I should not expect six male gamers to play out romantic subplots. Usually when I design characters, I make three female and three male. While I have never had a problem with guys refusing to play female characters, the intra-party romance never seems to be roleplayed.

I am glad I ran this last scenario, but I am ready to move on to new things. My plots (as you will see if you read on) tend to involve more investigation and dialog than the typical superhero scenario. The one element of roleplaying that bores me the most, combat, is often the defining element in superhero games.

## San Angelo Sentinels

The game I ran at Kublacon was the third in a series of adventures I ran using the Silver Age Sentinels play test rules (v3.7), though I ran it the very first time using BESM. I used the San Angelo city source book by Gold Rush Games mostly as a fall back should I need any specific city information on the fly. The premise of the world, not taken from San Angelo, is that superheros are treated like celebrities similar to sports stars. Details can be found on my website.

The great secret (that I revealed to players after each session) of the game is that I based the characters on the cast of Friends.<sup>1</sup> That gave me six heroes with intertwined relationships and personalities and all I had to do was assign powers. I changed the names and background details just enough so that once you knew, the parallels were obvious, but not immediately apparent. True fans of the show will recognize that I even named the episodes following the style of the show.

The net result was a game that had both soap opera and sitcom elements interwoven with the cinematic action. This combo, which we also see in Buffy, works really well, I think. Unfortunately, the soap opera elements always tended to be overshadowed by "the plot" of the game.

Full write-ups of PCs including background and SAS stats and episodes including timelines and NPC stats are available upon request.

### The Cast

#### Eugene Arquette (Ross)

Archaeologist with the power to create exact duplicates. Each duplicate could also make duplicates. There is no "original" and the Eugenes had to communicate normally (and argue about who had to go to work and who got to go on the date). Eugene was also cursed which basically meant I got to pick on him.

#### Gloria Arquette (Monica)

Athletic, super strong<sup>2</sup>, and great cooking skills. Gloria had no protective powers, but did have twice more Health than anyone else. Gloria is Eugene's younger sister and rival.

1: I started this back in 2001, so I did not get the inspiration from any recently published game that might have suggested something similar.

2: This was inspired by a comment that Rachel made while wrestling with Monica that she was "freakishly strong."

Jon Markson (Chandler)

Permanently invisible to everything but mental or mystical powers. He can also turn insubstantial. His lack of combat effectiveness made up for the fact that he was invaluable for reconnaissance. He was Eugene's best friend in college and is currently sleeping with Gloria.

Karen Black (Rachel)

Beautiful winged heroine and Victoria's Secret model. She has TK-based powers and is modeled after Peregrine from Wild Cards. She was Gloria's best friend in high school and was sleeping with Eugene until one of his duplicates cheated on her.

Ursula Delury (Pheobe)

Magic-based heroine who talks to spirits, including her evil twin brother whose bones she keeps in the closet.<sup>3</sup> She also had (uncontrolled) precognition that allowed me to give her a veiled clue in the form of a vision at the start of the game.

She was actually easier to create in BESM than SAS. I went through a few iterations of her dynamic powers before I came upon a version that was flexible but not overpowering.

Ace Carter (Joey)

With light-based powers including energy blast (with blinding effect), flight, and force field, he was the flashiest, though not the brightest, hero. He ended up being the most difficult to balance (and I never did get it right) because force field is so cheap and effective in SAS. Not even Gloria, who had the most powerful attack, could hurt him.

Bernie Leonard

In this world, each superhero team has a manager who works for the security agency and probably does not have powers. Bernie's job is to coordinate the team and keep it running smoothly while dealing with all the legal paperwork and corporate wrangling. If I get 7 players, he is available as a PC; otherwise, I run him as an NPC who mostly stays out of the way of the PCs unless I need a mouthpiece.

I will be at GenCon this year. I am not running anything, but I may be persuaded to run a pick-up game of some sort.

3: She has the defect "Skeleton in the Closet."

## The Episodes (with spoilers)

### The One with Robots

This is a classic story of a PhD engineer who fails to get capital funding for his start-up and so takes it out on the bank and his business rival. First, he sends his robots against the bank. Then the robots hold an elite dinner club hostage while other steal his rival's super-weapon. The heroes must race to track him down before he can unleash his master combat machine (think of a Marauder from Battletech) upon the city. Subplots include a commercial shoot involving Ursula, sponsor negotiations for Gloria, a "Meet the Sentinels" assembly at a local elementary school,<sup>4</sup> and Ace getting transferred (temporarily) to the LA Stars.

### The One With Aliens

The Sentinels help a fugitive alien escape from his comrades. The "aliens" are actually mutants in a religious cult thinly disguised as a satire of Scientology.<sup>5</sup> The heroes must uncover the truth about the aliens before they launch an offensive against the city. Subplots include a couple of government agents also investigating the aliens, Karen and Ursula at the opening of a women's shelter, a comic book signing in which Ezekiel, the leader of the aliens, removes Jon's invisibility,<sup>6</sup> and a celebrity golf tournament with Ace and Eugene that gets interrupted.

### The One With Talon

Talon is my version of Viper—a super-terrorist organization with various evil schemes. During a museum robbery, the heroes also encounter Freya, a new superheroine who claims she is the Norse goddess of the same name. While figuring out who Freya really is (and dealing with her romantic advances), they must stop a casino robbery, a truck hijacking, and deal with other Talon activities. Meanwhile, Jon is seeing a doctor to remove his invisibility, Ursula gets a stalker, and there is a pregnancy in the group.<sup>7</sup> In the final scene, Talon unleashes a weapon that suppresses all mutant powers in the city.<sup>8</sup>

4: Eugene and two others go. The other players play the role of kids asking questions of their favorite hometown heroes.

5: Including a spaceship shaped like a clam.

6: The permanence of his invisibility is a psychological block, not a physiological one.

7: The identify of the mother is obvious to fans of the show.

8: Created by the same doctor who was helping Jon.

**Me:** "Word processor"... that's funny.

**Myles Corcoran**

I think Cyberpunk 2020 had modifiers for different martial arts interacting with each other. This was in the form of a table showing attack modifiers. No defense modifiers were required because it uses a simple d10+mods vs. d10+mods system.

**Viktor Haag**

Since fruit is designed to be carried off, I do not think that a sentient plant would be disgusted. Animals are encouraged to pick fruit from the tree and deposit the seeds somewhere else. Under ripe fruit tastes bitter because it is not ready to be picked, so picking such fruit would be inappropriate.

**Spike Y Jones**

With under-powered classes, I think you have to make them NPC-only to prevent players from taking them with the assumption they are equal to the other classes. Experienced players may be able to recognize and avoid under-powered classes, but newbies (especially newbie GMs) may not be.

**Joshua Kronengold**

I like the fact that A&E includes a mix of American, British, Canadian, Australian, and other international forms of English. I say contributors should use the spellcheck and grammar appropriate for their form of English.

For me, the most convincing argument against spam is the same that was used to outlaw unsolicited faxes—it forces a cost upon the recipient.

**Mike Kubit**

There is an art to GMing, but like art, there are many different styles and techniques that are equally valid. I am all for secretly changing rolls but only if the players know the GM might do it. If they think the GM is letting the dice fall where they may, and then find the GM has been manipulating rolls (or visa-versa), extreme ugliness can result. It is also perfectly legitimate to GM without fudging a single die roll if it fits the tone of the campaign and the expectations of the players.

The distinction between what you call roleplaying games and adventure games is more about what the players bring to the game and what they build with it. RPGs have always been adventure games. Adventure games need not exclude roleplaying. They are not even two sides of the same coin—they are on the same side!

I have never heard anyone suggest with a point-based system that new PCs should start at the same number of points the existing PCs started. You just give the new PC the same number the existing PCs have now. The trope of "leveling up" is one the elements that turn me away from level-based games. It does not have to be (see M&M or d20 CoC), but the game designers, players, and GMs are often stuck with the "leveling up" mindset.

The way games like D&D are structured, if there is even a 2 or 3 level difference between characters, combat often becomes unsurvivable for the lower-level PCs or boring for the higher-level ones. It is best, I think, to set the new PC at the level of the other PCs, maybe 1 level below or higher, and run any background scenarios in the background, away from the current group of PCs.

**Jonathan Nicholas**

I find it telling that in your examples of sentencing, the person who probably needs counseling the most is instead left in prison with like-minded individuals. I cannot see how this is a better alternative to standard sentencing for assault.

**Lisa Padol**

Having "a knack for cutting to the heart..." is a glowing compliment from Dr. Cthulhupunk! :) When writing for A&E, I make an active effort to be concise and perhaps too much so.

**Simon Reeve**

Chess has a better publicist than checkers. :)  
Physics should not be a single skill in an RPG where board games are separate skills unless the RPG is about board games. If you want to focus on any activity, you can always justify to break up an existing skill in to many sub-specialties. Where GURPS fails as a "URPS" is that it does not adequately scale or "telescope" the skills for the genre or setting.

**Brian Rogers**

In defense of Bruce Baugh's position, I think far too many gamers (and fanboys of all stripes) expect too much from playtesting and interaction with creators. They do not see the big picture: game designers cannot use everyone's opinions and input. Stephen O'Sullivan knew this when he started Fudge and he clearly stated that all final design decisions were his and his alone.