CypherHeroes I

CYPHERHEROES I
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INTRODUCTION

CypherHeroes I provides advice and inspiration for the use of cyphers in superhero campaigns. It is ideally used in conjunction with a fleshed-out superhero setting, such as one based on the rules sketched out in pages 266-272 of the Cypher System Rulebook.

   Part I: Kinds of Heroic Cyphers provides four ideas for superhero-themed subtle cyphers, and *Part II: Gaining Heroic Cyphers* offers optional rules for distributing cyphers in genre-appropriate ways. The *Appendix: Sample Heroic Cyphers* contains exactly what it sounds like: some examples to get you started.

   Of course, all CypherHeroes content can be used together or piecemeal, at the GM's whim. Future CypherHeroes releases may include lists of cyphers, foci, superheroic and supervillainous NPCs, story seeds for CypherHero campaigns, and more.

PART I: KINDS OF HEROIC CYPHERS

While gadgets, crystals, ancient or alien relics, and other physical objects can make for good manifest cyphers in a heroic setting, subtle cyphers offer a wide range of possibilities that can be tailored to the genre beautifully. Here are some examples. They can be used with any method of subtle cypher distribution, but are especially appropriate with the two methods suggested below in *Part II: Gaining Heroic Cyphers*. They each also include individual examples of how they might be delivered to PCs, tailored to their natures.

HEADLINES

The Dapper Pugilist strikes fear into the hearts of evildoers! And also their faces! He strikes those, too!

A CypherHero is defined as much by her reputation as by her intentions and abilities. Headlines can be subtle cyphers that grant social abilities, such as intimidation, persuasion, the favor of the city's cops, and so on--but they can also be used to provide the inspiration that a hero needs in order to keep going, providing recovery, protection, or even power boosts (CSRP, pg 365). When starting with new PCs, or after a large chunk of downtime, it could be particularly interesting to let players come up with a recent headline about their CypherHero, and then have the GM fill in the power it grants.

GMs can provide headlines as cyphers when the CypherHeroes check the news the day after a major confrontation, or even in a moment of dire need: An-almost defeated hero, about to give up, is contacted by their team, and told of how Their City is Counting on Them!

ROGUE'S GALLERY

"We've dealt with The Wizard of Zo before; I bet I can find a way to suppress his heinous magicks!"

Other than a hero's reputation, the villains they face are probably their most important measure of self. From evil clowns to baddies in costumes with the inverse of the PC's color scheme, an iconic nemesis (or even a recurring anti-hero who switches sides at the drop of a hat) is going to massively influence both what a hero needs to do, and how they feel about themselves and their job as they do it. A defeated villain can be a source of knowledge or reluctant assistance, their weaknesses can be exploited in future conflicts, or even (for truly dramatic moral ambiguity) their villainous powers used for 'good.'

GMs can easily grant villain-based cyphers by saying, for example, the heroes learned a trick last time they fought a particular baddie, which can disable/destroy/detect/etc. similar enemies. However, this could also be an opportunity for CypherHeroes with a large Rogue's Gallery to face down new opponents by asking the GM for a cypher based on fights with a previous villain. During a gearing-up scene, Freedom's Friend might ask, "Last second-day we managed to shut down DarkMaster's mental control powers. Is it possible we learned something we can use against The Wizard of Zo today?" Perhaps the GM will call for a "search" roll, to represent the research, crafting, and testing of new tricks they learn from their villain... or, if it fits well enough, perhaps they will simply grant the cypher.

SIGNATURE MOVES

Before leaving his Basement of Brooding, Grittyman took a moment in front of his mirror to practice Walking Away from Explosions, limbering up his hips in case he should be unable to stop the bomb beneath Cityville Stadium. At least he'd survive, no matter how sad-and-angry-at-the-world surviving made him.

Sometimes protagonists in heroic fiction have powers that, mysteriously, only work at plot-convenient times; such as when they remember them, or after a side-character's exposition explains how they recharge it very rarely. These moves might be too powerful or unusual to fit into normal character abilities, but CypherHeroes can be given recurring cyphers to simulate them, just like dungeon crawling adventurers have recurring cyphers to account for healing potions, scrolls, and so on.

However, because it would be too convenient to let players both dictate and summon cyphers, GMs should consider working out with their players a set of suggestions for appropriate 'signature moves.' The GM can refer to this list when doling out cyphers, which lets the player have some input without giving them total control. Whether they are subtle or even manifest (iconic pieces of gear like tracking devices, grappling hooks, etc), how often they come into play should depend not on when they might be useful, but on the pacing at which the story can handle them. Their absence can be explained as unstable powers, budget problems, time constraints, the dangers of overuse, and so on.

extremely powerful cypher, but one that could only be useful in this particular situation, or against this particular foe While a secret weakness might seem to be too 'reusable' to be a cypher, keep in mind that the villain can return later having learned from their mistakes and compensated for these vulnerabilities.

Finding these cyphers might be the subject of an entire story arc, as the CypherHeroes track down leads and follow clues, or they could be gained through social interaction with a villain's family, former friends, spurned love-interest out for revenge, and so on.

TIPS AND SECRETS

It took some digging, but once they were able to track down Tantrum's secret identity, his mother was more than willing to explain how his powers worked--in exchange for their promise to bring him to justice alive!

CypherHeroes will sometimes find themselves facing villains or challenges that are seemingly impossible, even for them. In these situations, research, planning, and great effort will often result in them learning a secret that levels the playing field. This information offers an

PART II: GAINING HEROIC CYPHERS

The Cypher System rulebook (page 343) is clear that gaining subtle cyphers should be managed by the GM and should not be something the players can trigger at will. However, here are some suggestions inspired by superhero fiction that rely on tweaking this rule a bit. These two methods trade some (but certainly not all) of the GM's control of cyphers for better thematic support of the genre.

BACK AT BASE

Considering your close call with DarkMaster and his mind-controlled cronies, you and your teammates make it back to your base in Barry's Book Barn relatively unscathed. This being the one store in the city that no-one ever goes into, you should be safe for now, and can spend some time trying to figure out a way to counter his new Hypno-Blast….

This is the simplest method of cypher regeneration for CypherHeroes. Research, training, building and testing new gear, arguing loudly with each other--however superhero comics, movies, and shows flavor it thematically, these are the interludes when heroes gain new and boosted abilities that only last for one issue or episode. After most major conflicts, heroes who take time to prep or practice should be allowed a chance to regain cyphers, just like dungeon crawlers take time after a big fight to search the area for treasure.

Mechanically, treat this just like searching for and identifying cyphers, in terms of the number found and the identification of them, but flavor it as appropriate to the CypherHeroes in question. That might mean this is described as 'crafting gear,' 'learning new skills,' testing and trial-runs, practicing new applications of their power sets
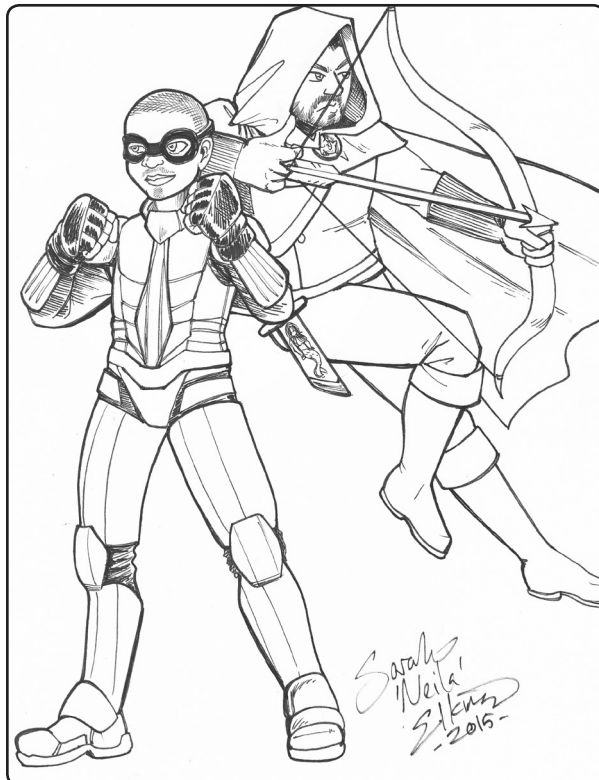
in safe conditions, and so on. Just keep in mind that these skills, abilities, and gadgets are indeed *cyphers*, and not the more permanent artifacts, skills, and abilities that cost XP. CypherHeroes are constantly rotating the abilities they use, even when they might logically want to be using one of them much more often (and if they decide the power of a cypher they once used was so important to their character that it should come back into play, you can of course discuss adding it as an artifact, a power, or simply a cypher you grant them more frequently).

This method is essentially a re-skinning of the standard 'loot the room and search the bodies' mechanic, but the re-skinning is important. If the heroes can't make it back to their usual base, what do they do? Build a new, temporary hideout, and gain appropriately altered cyphers? Stay with a different group of CypherHeroes, and borrow their gear for a while?

RECOVERY ROLLS

This method of cypher distribution signficantly alters the normal pattern of 'search for cyphers-identify cyphers-discard or store excess cyphers.' It requires the GM to be good at making up cyphers on the fly, have a list planned out, or be willing to randomize frequently. However, in exchange, it allows CypherHeroes and GMs to have a greater degree of control over the PC's current abilities, at times and in ways that reflect many common elements of the superhero genre.

For this method, modify the four standard recovery rolls to include the following benefits, but only if the characters can justify the bonus in a thematically appropriate way. For example, a character in battle can easily take advantage of *Plan B!* but wouldn't have the time for a 10-minute rest, let alone be able to *Gear Up!* On the other hand, someone sleeping for 10 hours can't participate in a training *Montage!* unless being asleep is thematically or comically appropriate for their character as a method of preparing for combat.

The descriptions below suggest changes to cypher identification. This is meant to reflect that CypherHeroes may have repeating abilities and gear, but the GM still has final say.

And, as a last note, if as a GM you like these options but think they grant PCs too much control over cypher generation, consider adding the 'search' roll back in: PCs make recovery rolls normally, but must ALSO succeed in searching in order to gain cyphers.

FIRST RECOVERY ROLL: PLAN B!

Crouched behind the overturned car, your armor still smoldering from that last attack, you radio your team: "Alright, so now it's angry...."

One action. You may choose to either regain Pool points as normal, or gain a cypher. The cypher is impromptu and poorly planned, and so is unidentified. The GM *may* tell you more-or-less what it does, or what you hope it will do, but it must be used as if unidentified (requiring an Intellect roll against its level), unless you have 1-10 minutes to spend studying it.

SECOND RECOVERY ROLL: GEAR UP!

Before heading out on patrol, you hydrate and consider your options. The new toy the Doc built? Or is it time to see what was in the pile of gear you took off The Wizard of Zo when you arrested him yesterday?

10 minutes. You regain Pool points as normal, and also gain a cypher. At the GM's option, the cypher is identified already, if it is a cypher common in your campaign. If not, you may use the 10 minutes of the rest to make a single roll to identify it. Further attempts will take additional time, and be at the GM's discretion.

THIRD RECOVERY ROLL: REGROUP!

"DarkMaster says he'll kill the mayor if we don't surrender to him before midnight. I say it's finally time we take the fight to him!"

You regain Pool points as normal, and gain two cyphers. They are unidentified, unless common.

FOURTH RECOVERY ROLL: MONTAGE!

Speedrun races on her treadmill and simultaneously works on beating her best time in Portal*. Freedom's Friend meditates in the sanctuary, holding her teammates in the Light. You put the finishing touches on Doc's new anti-telepathy helmets and give your weapons a thorough cleaning. The next time you face DarkMaster, he won't get away!*

You regain Pool points as normal, and gain one already-identified cypher per allied PC who also participates in this Montage (up to your maximum cypher limit). At least one of these cyphers should reflect a goal you are preparing for, but the GM decides how it does that.

Note that each allied PC who participates also gets their own new cyphers. Three CypherHeroes would generate up to three new cyphers for each of them, if they can hold that many.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE HEROIC CYPHERS

HEADLINE: DAPPER PUGILIST DECLARED KNOCKOUT NEWBIE!
Level: 1d6+1
Effect: Earned for making a strong first impression, the Dapper Pugilist can use this headline to keep up the streak by K.O.ing a number of mooks or henchmen, in immediate range, equal to the cypher's level.

### ROGUE'S GALLERY: THE SECRET OF DARKMASTER'S HYPNO-BLAST
Level: 1d6+3
Effect: DarkMaster whispered an alluring and powerful secret to you as he was being hauled away. You may dominate the will of one NPC of the cypher's level or lower, implanting a long-term goal or changing one major ideal of theirs permanently; the target also finds all of their emotions, especially love, joy, and happiness, dulled. Or, with an effort of will, forget this secret to render the Hypno-Blast useless, and gain an asset to resist mind-influencing effects for one day.

SIGNATURE MOVE: FREEDOM'S FRIEND'S COLLAPSING CANE STRIKE
Level: 1d6
Effect: Stun one target in immediate range for one round; the next round, they are dazed.
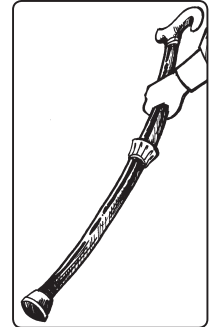
TIPS AND SECRETS: TANTRUM'S MOM
Level: 1d6+2
Effect: Since he believes his identity is secret, asking Tantrum about his mother or revealing you know how he got his powers will surprise him, leaving him unable to use his auto-stun ability, Cry of the Giant Baby, for a number of rounds equal to the cypher's level.