ICONS

TEAM-UP

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Introduction

I'm a Bronze Age kinda guy.

My love affair with comics began when I was a child in the 1970s, and reached its full bloom as an adolescent in the 1980s. The titles published during those two decades speak loudest to me, even though my association with comics continued through the Iron Age 90s (when I worked in the business at the distribution and retail level) and to the present day. The Bronze Age style -- a mix of the forward-looking optimism and heroism of the Silver Age with touches of concern for current events in a nod towards "realism" -- is what I consider to be the platonic ideal of comic book storytelling.

Of all the titles I avidly read during that period, my favorites were undoubtedly the team-up books. Not the team books (although I loved some of those as well), but rather the team-UP books -- titles which featured two unrelated heroes joining forces on a one-shot story. DC Comics had **The Brave and the Bold**, which featured Batman teaming with an array of guests, and **DC Comics Presents**, which did the same for Superman. Marvel's stable included **Marvel Team-Up**, which paired Spider-Man with guest heroes, and **Marvel Two-in-One**, which had The Thing in the spotlight role.

Each of these titles introduced me to characters from books that I didn't read, or who weren't popular enough to merit books of their own. Most importantly, however, these books helped to paint a vibrant picture of a coherent universe for their publishers -- a world where all of their heroes existed side by side, and could occasionally cross paths. It made those worlds more accessible, more believable... it lent them a sense of reality.

My love of those Bronze Age team-up books, and the role they played in fleshing out their fictional universes, were the inspiration behind this book, **ICONS Team-Up.** Even though **ICONS** was primarily designed with pick-up games in mind, focusing on the ability to quickly generate heroes and start playing, a great many superhero-genre gamers (myself included), prefer to run extended campaigns, crafting comic-book universes as vibrant as those of Marvel, DC and other publishers.

That's where this book comes in. In the parlance of the grandfather of all roleplaying games, if **ICONS** was our "Player's Handbook" and **The Villainomicon** our "Monster Manual", then **ICONS Team-Up** is our "Dungeon Master's Guide" -- a book for GMs, filled with options you can add to your games, a system for creating and running entire comic-book universes, and a bevy of tools and advice.

But enough yammering from me. Strap in, kids -- here we go!

Gareth-Michael Skarka

CLARIFICATIONS

In the time since the release of the **Icons** core rulebook, we've received a number of common questions via email and on internet forums. We figured that we'd take this opportunity to turn things over to **Icons** main designer, the Sensational Steve Kenson, to provide some clarification to the most commonly-asked questions:

TESTS

How do I gauge difficulty for unopposed tests?

Use the table on page 6 of **Icons.** If you want a test where the hero has a roughly 60% chance of success, set the difficulty at the same level as the hero's ability level. More than two higher than the hero's ability has less than a 1-in-5 chance without spending Determination, while less than 2 lower than the hero's ability is so easy it's hardly worth asking for a test. So most difficulty levels should be within +/–2 of the ability level, unless extraordinarily difficult or easy.

How do I handle tests between non-player controlled characters like two villains? Who rolls?

Nobody does. Just compare the two characters' capabilities and use that outcome (within the range of +/–5 possibilities) or, since you're talking about two GM-controlled characters anyway, just choose any plausible outcome you want and have that happen. You don't need to roll tests for everything, especially when it doesn't involve any of the players directly. Just go with what makes the most sense and works in the context of your story.

Example: *The Fox and Merry Widow get into a catfight with some encouragement from a captured hero. Fox is Prowess 6, Coordination 6 and an expert in Acrobatics and Martial Arts (giving her level 8 for most combat applications of those abilities). Merry Widow is Prowess 6, Coordination 5, and has the Acrobatics and Martial Arts specialties (giving her effective levels of 7 and 6). That gives Fox the edge, albeit a slight one: on average, she can hit Widow with a moderate success with her baton for 6 damage and just dodge Widow's attack. She should be able to take her down in two pages or so, unless the GM decides to give Widow a "lucky break" with a dodge or attack. Either way, it gives the hero two pages of distraction to try and get free...*

Since blocking is an action, do you have to declare who you are blocking, or does it affect all appropriate attacks until the character's next panel?

If you're blocking, you can block any attacks against you that page.

Do all touch attacks and other unarmed attacks require you to be at personal range?

Yes, they do.

Is the Martial Arts specialty for attacking only, or can it be used for defense, and if so, under what circumstances?

The Martial Arts specialty can apply a Prowess bonus for evading, which applies to close (Prowess and Strength) attacks, but not ranged attacks. Probably why martial artists are so often also acrobats...

Similarly the Weapons specialty can apply to evasion ("parry") attempts when it involves a close weapon (using Prowess) as opposed to a ranged one.

DAMAGE

Since villains and GM-controlled characters don't roll tests, how do you handle things like possible stuns and slams against them?

In any case where a player would normally make a test to resist or avoid something, simply reverse how the test works for a non-player character: the player rolls a test with the hero's acting trait to determine the effective difficulty, which is compared against the villain's unmodified trait (since villains don't roll tests).

Example: *Electric Judy hits Redkap with a double-kick with a major success, a potential slam outcome. So Judy's player tests her damage level agaisnt Redkap's Strength of 4. She rolls poorly, getting an effort of 2. That gives Redkap a moderate outcome (4 effort vs. 2 difficulty) so he is only knocked down by the impact, not hurled away.*

Likewise, when Miss Tikal hits the Troll with a Mystic (Mental) Blast, rather than rolling a Willpower test for Troll (as given in the power description), the GM asks Miss Tikal's player to roll a Wizardry test against a difficulty of Troll's Willpower, reading the results like a blasting attack. Good thing Willpower is Troll's weak spot!

If an attack achieves a potential slam or stun outcome and inflicts 0 or more Stamina damage to the target, test the target's Strength against the damage level. Is damage level for these tests figured before or after applying armor?

The attack's original damage level (before applying armor) is used for those tests.

Example: *All-Star hits the Troll with a massive success. Troll's Invulnerability reduces the damage to 0, but not less than 0, so there is a possible stun outcome for the massive success. All-Star's player rolls a Strength 9 test against a difficulty of Troll's Strength (which is also 9). He gets a +0 roll, giving Troll an effective moderate success against the stun, so the villain is stunned for one page and cannot act. If All-Star had scored a +1 or more on his roll, he would have knocked Troll out!*

How is damage from a fall handled?

Determine a damage level: 1–3 for a relatively short fall, 4–6 for a moderate distance, and 7–10 for a long fall. As a quick rule of thumb, consider a fall's damage level equal to its distance in feet, divided by 10. So a 10-foot fall is damage 1, up to a 100-foot fall as damage 10. Damage maxes out at level 10.

Treat a fall as a possble killing outcome as well: test the victim's Strength against the damage (assuming 0 or more damage is inflicted) with the results given on p. 70 of Icons.

Example: *All-American Girl grabs Troll and flies up, up, and away to move the fight out of the crowded urban area. Troll manages to clock America's Sweetheat and stuns her momentarily, apparently forgetting she's what's keeping them in the air. Oops. Troll falls some 90 feet for 9 damage (90, divided by 10). His Invulnerability reduces that to 0 Stamina damage, but the GM still asks All-American Girl's player to test the damage against Troll's Strength for a possible killing outcome. She rolls and gets a 0 on the dice for an effort of 9. That's equal to Troll's Strength 9, a moderate outcome, so his Stamina is reduced to 0 and he's left unconscious (but otherwise unharmed) by the fall. Had All-American Girl's player rolled a –3 or less, or if the fall had been one damage level less, there would have been no effect on Troll at all.*

POWERS

Some powers are marked as being worth two, meaning they powers occupy two "slots" in the random hero creation system. In the optional points system, powers cost 1 point per level. Do double powers cost double as well?

They don't by default (powers all cost the same: 1 point per level), although you can have them cost double if you prefer.

Some powers grant Bonus Powers that occupy another power slot without needing to be rolled. How do Bonus Powers work in the point buy system? Do you just pay for them as a separate power?

Essentially, yes. Much of what bonus powers are intended to do is irrelevant in the point-buy system, since you get to pick all your powers anyway. So you don't need the ability to swap random powers for themed ones that bonus powers gives you.

So most "bonus" powers are just bought as additional powers for the usual 1 point per level. In cases where a bonus power is a modification to an existing power, like making a touch power work at close range without touching, treat it like increasing the power's cost per level by 1 (so from 1 per level to 2 per level for "base" power).

The Absorption power refers to taking a bonus power to make it apply to all physical damage or all energy damage. The Invulnerability power says it applies to all physical damage. Does this mean Invulnerability doesn't apply to energy damage?

No, it does. Technically, it should say Invulnerability applies to "all physical and energy damage." In that instance, "physical" means "not mental, spiritual, or biological. So Invulnerability does not protect against Mental Blasts, for example, or toxic Afflictions. It does, however, protect against things like lasers and lightning bolts just as much as punches, bullets, and kinetic blasts.

The Alter-Ego power creates a second powered form for a hero. How do I create a hero who just has an ordinary (non-powered) human identity?

A hero with an ordinary human identity can simply take it as a challenge ("Normal Identity" or the like). The "point-cost" of the normal form is largely irrelevant, so long as it fits whatever parameters the GM defines, such as having no powers, and no abilities higher than level 5–6, or example. The two identities could share some qualities and challenges or have different ones, depending on just how different they are.

A great many villains have Invulnerability or Force Field of 6–7 or better. If no hero on the team deals more than 6 damage, it's too difficult to defeat those villains.

Players can use focused effort (**ICONS** p. 79) or stunts to circumvent a villain's advantages —and then, of course, players can also tag a villain's aspects for advantage. The players might have to think outside the "I hit him" box, but there are options. Indeed, a great many comic stories revolve around finding a way to overcome a seemingly "invulnerable" villain.

At the GM's discretion, a team of heroes facing off against a villain they can't normally damage due to disparities between armor and damage output may count as a challenge and the GM may choose to award the players Determination for it to further assist the innovative tactics needed to overcome the villain.

Say you have Force Field 4 and you need at least Force Field 8 to contain an explosive, how can a hero increase a power's rank?

Technically, you can't: there's no game mechanic in Icons for increasing a power's rank (outside of the optional advancement rules).

However, you can frame the situation in a different way: namely, a hero has Force Field 4 and needs to contain an explosion. The GM decides the difficulty is 8, meaning the player needs to roll a +4 or better on a Force Field test to succeed. Given that there's only about a 5% chance of that, the player is most likely going to want to tag one of the character's qualities to make this a determined effort.

If lacking in Determination, a clever player can offer a temporary Challenge as a means of getting an extra point (see Gaining Determination on p. 81 of **Icons**); "Can I apply a 'tired' or 'pushed to the limits' aspect to my hero to reflect that he is really tired out?" The GM gets to approve, and can also say that, after the hero manages to pull off containing the explosion, he is at a penalty, his Force Field is temporarily "burnt out" or some other consequence to reflect the challenge.

If a use of the Blinding power succeeds, what are the effects of being blinded?

See Limited Visibility on p. 68 of **Icons**. The GM may wish to apply the –2 modifier to all attacks for a blinded character (rather than just ranged attacks) due to the more profound effect of being blinded.

I have a character with Leaping 3. Exactly how far is that? The Leaping power entry only talks about level 7 and beyond.

As Leaping 7 is "out to visual distance," Leaping 1–6 is between close and visual range; we can probably say that level 3 is about halfway, whatever that may be, so chances are it's a fair distance (like several city blocks). Lots of powers and traits in Icons—including movement powers like Flight, Leaping, and Swimming—are deliberately vague as far as exact measurements like distance, weight, etc. to allow for some creative interpretation.

Is the only way to defend against Power Theft not getting hit? Most powers allow some kind of resistance test, but not Power Theft?

The defense against Power Theft is indeed not getting hit. That seems to be how power thieves work in the comics. I haven't seen too many cases of targets "resisting" — struggling to escape the power thief's grip, sure, but not going "Whew, lucky I was able to keep Lamprey from stealing my powers!" Of course, a low level power thief is going to take some time to fully drain a target. A decent variant for those who want it is an opposed power level test, with the thief stealing levels equal to the effect.

How do I handle a villain (or non-player hero) with Probability Control when they don't have or use Determination?

Similar to a hero, the villain has "bonus" Determination equal to the Probability Control power's level. The Good Luck version allows the villain to effectively increase an ability by +2 per point spent for one action or retcon "lucky breaks". The Bad Luck version allows the villain to increase difficulties for others by +2 per point spent or retcon "unlucky breaks" for them.

In both cases, the GM gets a number of "free" uses equal to the villain's power level before having to award the players any Determination. Any uses of Probability Control past that point should award Determination like any other challenge or villainous use of Determination.

Example: *The Killer Gamemaster uses his Probability Control to cause a ladder to break under a hero, increasing the difficulty of the Coordination test by +2. This costs one of his "free" uses of Probability Control but does not award the affected hero a Determination point.*

Some GMs may wish to award Determination for villainous uses of Probability Control anyway, depending on the style of the game. Typically, most villains will exhaust their free uses fairly quickly, especially if they are facing a whole team of heroes, but some groups may find being deprived of the usual rewards of encountering challenges somewhat frustrating. Balance withholding and awarding Determination as best suits the flow of your game.

When doing point-buy how is Wizardry handled? If I buy Wizardry 4 it counts as two powers. How much does it cost? How much for additional powers?

The point-buy option does not alter the "cost" of a power (in points), they all cost the same: 1 point per level. You can double the costs, if you like, but it tends to place those powers pretty out of reach without also increasing the amount of points available. Point-buy also doesn't really provide bonus powers. If you need to apply one, pay the power's level cost again.

Can Wizardry boost an existing power?

Use the Ability Boost power (**Icons**, p. 29) as a guideline: increase the affected power up to the Wizardry level (rather than adding them; Icons scale makes that problematic) for pages equal to Wizardry level, then impose a –1 modifier to the affected power's level for the same number of pages after the boost wears off. Thus Wizardry can only boost powers with a level lower than the Wizardry power level itself, weak Wizardry can't boost a stronger power.

How do I handle a villain (or non-player hero) with Wizardry, since only heroes have and use Determination?

Same as handling a villain performing a stunt or any other use of Determination, really. Choose the character's standard Wizardry powers (equivalent to a hero's assigned bonus powers). Any other powers you come up with for the character to duplicate in play count as stunts; award players Determination when the villain uses them.

Note that since there's no real limit to how many standard Wizardry powers you can assign a villain in advance, you should be reasonably generous in awarding Determination, so long as the duplicated power is something that counts as a new

challenge for the heroes. If it is just a variation on a theme (more for flavor than effect) you might withhold a Determination award, but generally try to hand out some Determination when a foe uses the flexibility of Wizardry to his or her advantage.

Example: *Tempus Khan has Wizardry (Gagets) 9, representing his tremendously advanced technology. His standard powers for it are Blast and Time Control. If the GM has Khan bust out with a Dimensional Travel Ray (the equivalent of an Alternation Ray for the Dimensional Travel power on p. 46 of Icons) to transport the heroes to an alternate Earth, that's worth awarding the affected heroes Determination for the villain's novel power use. If, on the other hand, Khan just uses his Wizardry to increase his Strength to 9 (like a use of Ability Boost) so he can engage his foes in "honorable" hand-to-hand combat, the GM might consider that just a minor variation, given his standard Blast power already lets him do level 9 damage at a distance, and not award any Determination for that particular use of Wizardry on the villain's part. The same would likely be true if Tempus Khan used his Wizardry to present a holographic image of his master plan to some captured heroes; it's technically a Wizardry stunt for the Illusion power, but it doesn't really constitute a challenge for the heroes (indeed, it may actually help them out when they later manage to escape!).*

DETERMINATION

What's the real difference between a quality and a challenge?

The key difference between a quality and a challenge is players can tag qualities to spend Determination and the GM can compel them, awarding Determination. Challenges, on the other hand, can only be compelled. Their only "upside" is they earn you Determination. Tagging qualities costs you Determination. Having qualities or challenges compelled earns you Determination.

In Icons, would it be correct to say only player characters have determination? If so, why do villains have qualities and challenges at all?

A player can spend one or more Determination in order to compel one of the villain's challenges in order to get a bonus against them in just the same way as they can spend one or more Determination to tag one of their own qualities for a similar bonus.

Example: *The heroes are having trouble getting through Rex Mundi's level 9 Force Field. One player spends Determination to tag the villain's "Superiority Complex" challenge to power-stunt an electrical Blast into a Binding with the rationale that the "King of the World" didn't bother to sufficiently shield the joints of his armour properly because he didn't expect anyone to target them, so with a well-aimed Blast she can short them out and prevent him from moving temporarily.*

The GM can also tag one of the villain's qualities in order to give the villain a bonus. Instead of the villain spending Determination to do this, the player of the hero affected by the villains' action gains Determination.

Example: *The heroes are facing down the Octofather, who is using his powerful Mind Control against them. The GM tags the Octofather's "Fuggeddaboudit" quality in order to guarantee a massive success against the last holdout hero. This ends up costing 2 Determination, which are given to the hero... as the team realizes they're standing in an empty warehouse with no memory of why they are there or what just happened. When they realize the Octofather has messed with their memories (and implanted some post-hypnotic commands) the heroes will need that extra Determination!*

So how do the players (and/or their heroes) know a villain has a particular challenge? Sure, it can come from investigation (the villain is motivated to find a cure for her spouse's disease) or observation (the villain only steals items related to canines), but what about other challenges that are hidden?

Roleplaying interaction, encouraging villains to monologue and give things away, using super-senses (including telepathy and precognition), Intellect, Awareness, or Presence tests for insight into a foe's background, psychology, or to encourage the aforementioned interactions, or pure and simple guesswork, to name a few. In the last case, the GM is encouraged to be fairly generous: if a player is in the ballpark, they get to tag the challenge and spend the Determination. It's often more of an art than a science.

Can I get examples of tagging qualities and challenges in action?

For example, a player tags her hero's "Compassionate" quality in order to spend Determination on a test to rescue the victims of a disaster, drawing on the strength of her compassion. Or a player tags his hero's "Billionaire Playboy" quality to spend Determination to retcon having access to a penthouse apartment and skilled valet in a strange foreign city. ("Nice to have you visiting, sir.")

Challenges work similarly. The GM compels a hero's "Weakened by Darkness" challenge, saying the villain has trapped him in a lightless box. The player gets a point of Determination and has to figure a way out ... without the use of the hero's powers! Players can play the compelling game, too: A player asks to compel her hero's severe Claustrophobia, suggesting perhaps the collapsing debris has trapped her in a small space. She gets to play out the hero's struggle to free herself and earns a point of Determination for doing so.

Catchphrases and Epithets: Do they provide any game system benefit?

Sure, they are eminently useful qualities to tag when you need to spend Determination; for example, a hero making a determined effort might yell out her catchphrase, whereas a hero using focused effort might remind someone, even if it's just the other players, of his epithet ("Well, fortunately, I am 'Hell on Wheels' so..."). Remember, tagging a quality is a required in order to spend Determination in most instances.

Catchphrases and particularly epithets might also get compelled from time to time. If a hero is the "Tinseltown Terror" then the GM might compel that epithet to cause someone to have a bad reaction towards the hero, for example.

Why the requirement that a hero fail at something before being able to use Determined Effort? Doesn't that just encourage failure?

In a way. **Icons** takes the approach that failure is potentially as interesting and dramatic as success. Therefore we don't want the availability of Determination and determined effort to completely eliminate failure from the game; comic book heroes more often fail initially and then come back from that failure more determined to succeed, which is what the determined effort mechanics emulate.

Note that caveat in determined effort that if there is only one shot at success, then a prior failure is not required. Essentially, if the failure is one the hero could not come back from, then the player can use determined effort on the first (and only) test. It's the difference between having only one shot to disarm the Doomsday Device and save the world and having to fight a villain (making multiple tests) and initially fail to overcome your foe in order to make a comeback and surge to victory.

The test required to perform a stunt (**Icons**, p. 80) seems kind of unfair: a player can spend Determination, then fail the test to make the stunt and get nothing out of it!

That does seem unfair, so consider the following an official change to the **Icons** rules found on p. 80: When attempting a stunt, the player still makes a power level test against the power's level as the difficulty. Failure on the test (an outcome less than 0) means the stunt has an unexpected side-effect or complication of the GM's choice. Success (an outcome of 0 or more) means the stunt works exactly as the player intended, although an additional test may be required to use or apply the stunt, such as a test to hit with a new attack, for example. In both cases, the stunt still happens, however.

Example: *Miss Tikal needs to perform a Magic stunt to whip up a spell that will allow her to read a cultist's mind (the Telepathy power). Her player spends a point of Determination for the stunt and rolls a Magic test against Miss Tikal's own Magic level. The dice are not with her and she gets a –2 roll, meaning an outcome of –2 as well. So the GM says the stunt is successful and Miss Tikal can make another Magic test to read the cultist's mind, but there is also the side effect of something in the recesses of his mind engaging the sorceress in psychic combat: the mind-reading becomes a Costly Escalating Pyramid Test (see Pyramid Tests later in this book).*

Example of Play: Ambushed by the Alliance of Evil!

The following is a segment of an Icons game set-up to demonstrate how the different elements of the system come together at the game table.

Two heroes—All-American Girl and the Hangman—are investigating the mysterious disappearance of their friend Saguaro, unaware they're being set-up for an ambush by the Ultra-Mind's sinister Alliance of Evil, which has captured several heroes. Three members of the Alliance—Count Malochio, The Creeper, and Grudge—wait in hiding in an abandoned factory complex. Following the clues, the two heroes arrive and enter unawares...

GM: The interior of the factory is dark, the only light coming in from around the boards covering the high windows. Rusting hulks of machinery cast deep shadows over the aisles between them. What do you do?

Hangman: Stay sharp, All-American Girl, we still don't...

GM: (interrupting) Suddenly, Hangman's warning is choked off as a heavy vine coils around his throat and lifts him off the floor!

The GM slides Hangman's player a Determination token.

GM: At the same moment, a massively muscled, grey-skinned figure rises up, smashing aside one of the presses on the factory floor, his roar of anger echoing in the cavernous room.

All-American Girl: Grudge!

GM: A voice sounds from up on the catwalk overlooking the floor:

Count Malochio: Get her, Grudge! Do as the Ultra-Mind commands and you will be rewarded!

GM: All-American Girl, you need to defend against Grudge's attack as he lunges forward with a double-fisted smash.

All-American Girl: I dodge out of the way!

She rolls the dice, getting a result of +0. Applying that to her Coordination 4, with a +1 for her Acrobatics specialty, she gets an effort of 5, the same as Grudge's Prowess ... barely enough!

GM: You manage to roll to the side just as Grudge's fists come down, smashing chunks out of the concrete floor.
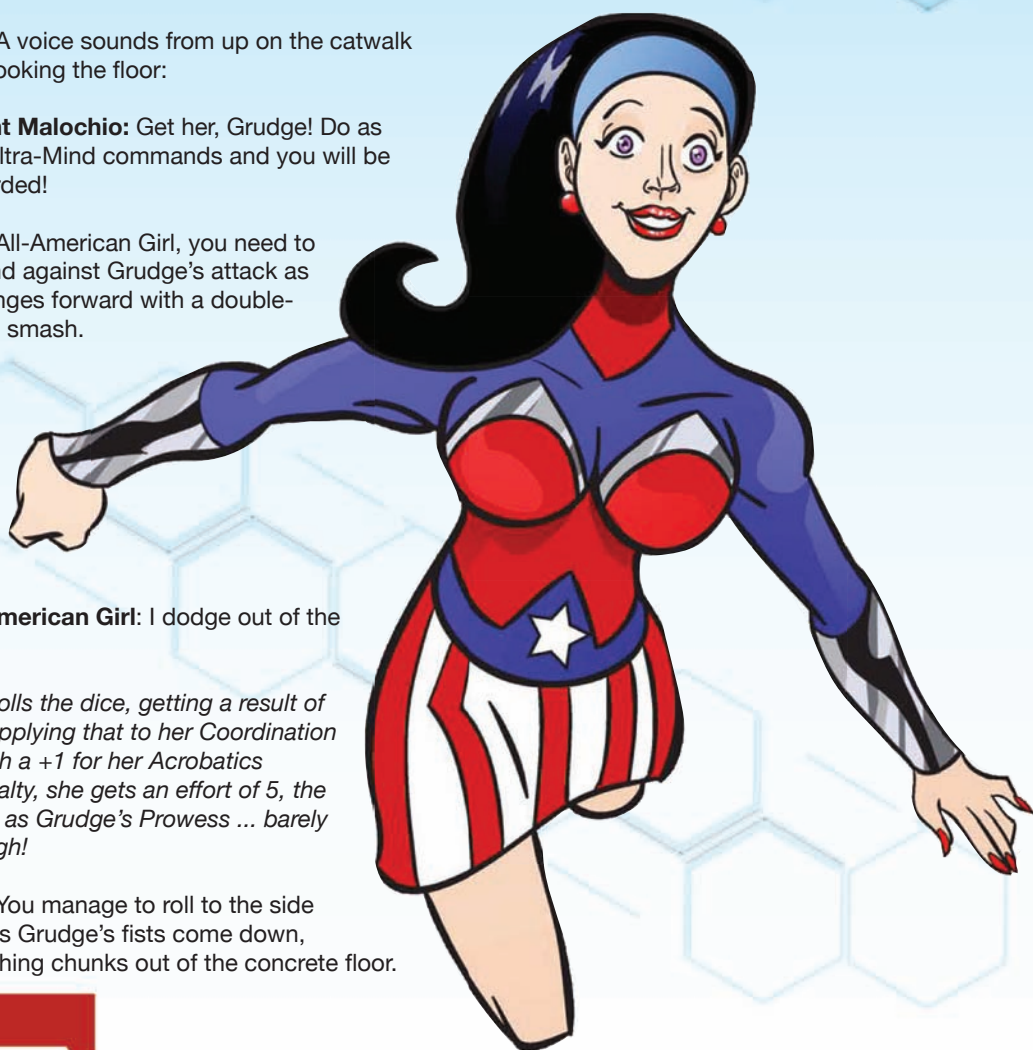
Hangman, you hear another mocking voice coming from the catwalk behind you.

Creeper: HAHAHA! How does it feel to be on the other end of a noose for a change, Hangman?

The choking vine is cutting off your air, Hangman. Make a Strength test.

Hangman's player rolls the dice, getting a –1. Added to his Strength 3, that's an effort of 2. The GM consults the guidelines for suffocation (drowning) under Swimming on page 59 of Icons: Hangman needs a successful Strength test each page to avoid going unconscious and losing Strength levels. Starting from 0 difficulty, he has a moderate success on the first page and so loses 2 Stamina, bringing him from 8 to 6.

GM: From high up on the catwalk, Count Malochio fires a beam of laser-like energy from his amulet at you, All-American Girl.

All-American Girl: I'll dodge that, too.

She rolls the dice again, getting a +0 result again for an effort of 5. Count Malochio's Coordination is only 3, but he's an Expert with his Evil Eye, giving him level 5 for attacking, it's not quite enough, however, and All-American Girl just succeeds.

GM: You just manage to dodge the beam. You hear Malochio curse in Italian.

Okay, heroes, it's your turn. All-American Girl, you go first. (Normally, the GM probably would have had Hangman, with the higher Coordination, go first, but he's a bit tied up at the moment.)

All-American Girl: I should probably help Hangman...

GM: I don't know, I think you "can handle this on your own."

The GM slides All-American Girl's player a Determination token. He is tagging All-American Girl's "I can handle this on my own" challenge. Her player decides to accept the Determination and changes her plans.

All-American Girl: Okay, I'm going after Count Malochio, flying up at the catwalk, out of Grudge's reach. I say, "Is that all you've got? That hardly 'counts' at all!" Then I swoop in and take a swing at him.

GM: Ouch! Okay, make your attack test...

All-American Girl's player rolls the dice for a –1 result. With her Prowess 5, she gets an effort of 4. That equals Malochio's Prowess for a close attack, so All-American Girl gets a 0 effect, just enough for a moderate outcome. Unfortunately, she and Malochio are well-matched: her Strength is 7, but his Evil Eye gives him Force Field 7, meaning the Count takes no Stamina damage.

GM: A glowing aura springs up around Count Malochio, and your punch glances off of it. Hangman?

Hangman: Ugh. I need to get out of this vine-noose. Can I use my Swinging power to grab the vine, kick my legs and swing up and over at the catwalk? I want to kick Creeper in the face and at break his concentration enough for me to get loose.

GM: (considers for a moment) Sure. Make a Prowess test, but I'm going to bump up the difficulty for the swing and because you can't see Creeper yet.

Hangman: Can I make a Determined effort?

GM: No, not yet. You have more than one chance to get out of this trap and you haven't tried anything yet. Just roll.

Hangman's player rolls and gets a +2. With his Prowess 6, that's an 8 effort. The GM decided on +3 difficulty total for the swing (equal to a supplemental action, –1) and for Hangman initially being unable to see Creeper behind him (an impaired visibility modifierl –2). Still, Creeper only has Prowess and Coordination 3, so even with the difficulty increase, Hangman scores an effect of 2 for a moderate success!

Hangman has Strength 3 and Creeper has no armor, so he does 3 Stamina damage, reducing Creeper from 8 to 5. However, the GM rules that while the kick staggers Creeper slightly it does not break his Plant Control: the choke-vine still has its iron grip on Hangman's neck.

The first page of the conflict is complete. The GM moves on to the next page, starting again with the villains.

GM: All-American Girl, Grudge suddenly grabs your leg from behind, having grown even larger!

All-American Girl's player defends, but rolls a –2. Additionally, the GM decides to give Grudge a surprise attack bonus for suddenly increasing in size, since All-American Girl clearly thought he couldn't reach her. That makes his Prowess effectively 7 against her effort of 3; he gets a major outcome on his bashing attack for a possible slam (Icons, p. 70), which was certainly the intention.

GM: Roll a Strength test against a possible slam.

AA Girl's player rolls again, a –2, for an effort of 5 with her Strength. Grudge's Strength level is currently 8, so she fails.

GM: Grudge slams you into the machinery. You take 1 Stamina damage through your Invulnerability and hit the floor hard, leaving a pretty serious dent in the heavy machine press.

All-American Girl: Ouch!

GM: Count Malochio fires a searing beam form his Evil Eye.

All-American Girl: Should I dodge?

GM: (shakes head) No, the beam misses you, however, it washes over the wreckage of the machine press above you and the metal melts and pours down over you like heavy syrup, cooling and hardening around you!

The GM slides another Determination token to All-American Girl's player for Malochio's unorthodox maneuver and success with it.

GM: Hangman, make another Strength test.

Hangman's player rolls the dice, getting a –2! That's an effort of just 1, but the difficulty of the test is only 1 this page (up 1 from 0 the previous page), so he still gets a moderate outcome. Hangman loses another 2 Stamina, bringing him down to 4.

GM: I also need a Coordination test, as the vines and plants around Creeper grab at you.

Hangman's player rolls again, this time getting a +1. With his Coordination 5 and Acrobatics specialty, that's a 7 effort, against Creeper's Coordination 3 and Plant Control specialty (+1). He evades the grabbing vines.

Hangman: I'm going to give Creeper a taste of the gallows and use the Noose of Judgment on him!

Hangman's player rolls a Coordination test with the Noose's Binding attack, rolling a +0, but with his Coordination 5 and Weapon specialty, he gets a 6 effort against Creeper's Coordination 3, enough for a major outcome!

Hangman: I loop the noose over his torso, binding his arms to their sides, and I want to flip him off the catwalk so he's dangling in mid-air and knows that if I pass out, he drops!

GM: Okay, you've got him in a hold, so give me a Strength test to flip him off the catwalk.

Hangman's player rolls a +1 for a 4 effort against Creeper's Strength 3 and succeeds. The plant-controlling villain is flung off the catwalk, dangling in the grip of Hangman's noose.

GM: All-American Girl, you're bound by the metal around you. Your only physical action this turn can be to try and break loose.

All-American Girl: Okay, I'll try and use my Strength to bust out.

She rolls a Strength test and gets a +0. The effort of 7 isn't enough against the layer of Strength 8 steel around her. She struggles to no avail. No Determined effort is possible this page because AA Girl had not yet attempted the action.

The second page of the conflict ends. The third begins with the villain's actions.

GM: All-American Girl, Grudge's shadow falls across you as you struggle to get out of the steel trap. He bares his teeth, roars in anger, and smashes his fists down.

All-American Girl: Uh-oh... I can't defend, can I?

GM: No, you're an immobile target right now.

Grudge has Prowess 5 and the difficulty to hit All-American Girl is currently 0 (see Immobile Targets, Icons, p. 68). That's a massive outcome on his bashing attack!

GM: Give me a Strength test against a stun.

AA Girl's player considers: There's only one chance on this test, so she probably could make a Determined effort using her "Don't Give Up" quality in order to succeed, but she and Hangman are outnumbered and she isn't sure she wants to spend the Determination rather than saving it for the next part of the adventure. So she decides to go with a straight roll, getting a +0. That's a 7 effort against an 8 difficulty (Grudge's Strength) for a –1, a failure, which reduces All-American Girl's Stamina to 0 and renders her unconscious.

GM: Hangman, Creeper scatters a handful of seeds onto the factory floor, which instantly sprout and grow into a thick bed of vines, creepers, and moss beneath him. Give me another Strength test against the choke vine.

Hangman's player rolls a +0 for an effort of 3 against difficulty 2, and so takes another 2 Stamina damage, leaving him with only 2 Stamina remaining.

GM: ... Then Count Malochio fires a beam from the Evil Eye at you.

Hangman's player rolls a –1 to dodge for an effort of 5. That's just equal to Malochio's Coordination plus his Expert specialty, enough for Hangman to barely succeed. However, the GM doesn't want to drag things out any longer with Hangman at just 2 Stamina against three barely winded villains, so he slides Hangman's player a Determination token.

GM: The blast hits you square in the chest, you slump back against the wall, and everything goes black...

What will happen to the heroes who have fallen into the clutches of the Alliance of Evil? Will their few remaining teammates find them in time? What fiendish end does the Ultra-Mind have in store for them? For that, the Game Master turns to the next chapter of the adventure! With two extra Determination each, hopefully our heroes are well prepared for it!

ADD-ONS & VARIANTS

No one game system is going to perfectly fit the needs of every group of players and some "tailoring" may be required to get that perfect fit. Since the start of the hobby, groups have introduced "house rules" to handle things not addressed in a system or to adjust the system to better suit their style of play. This section looks at a variety of options, changes, and add-ons to the Icons "rules as written" and how you can use them to tailor your game to suit your needs, and those of your players.

As with any modifications to an existing system, we recommend trying out the game rules "as written" at least once to get a sense of how they actually work in play before you decide to modify them. It's possible what you think is going to be a problem is not once you have had a chance to actually see the game in action. If it is, then you can certainly modify it. Likewise, consider any rules variations carefully, since changing one part of the game can have unforeseen effects on other parts of the system. We try and outline those effects here, when possible, but there's a reason for calling the side effects "unforeseen"—not even the designers and publishers can know all the possible permutations in advance.

Most of all, however, **Icons** is your game, and you should feel free to modify, customize, and tailor it to your hearts' content. It's about having fun, so if you (and your players) really enjoy some of the variants in this section then, by all means, take them and run with them!

ABILITY VARIANTS

The six basic abilities in **Icons** cover a lot of ground in terms of defining characters. However, some may prefer to create an even simpler set of abilities by dropping one or two of the existing six and subsuming their uses into another ability. The three easiest abilities in **Icons** to remove from the game are Prowess, Awareness, and Willpower.

DROPPING *Prowess*

Prowess is a bit of an odd duck in terms of abilities since it is the one most involving a fair amount of skill or training: close combat ability. Few characters are going to have a Prowess level higher than 4 without some degree of training or experience, and Prowess 6+ characters can be expected to have considerable amounts of both. So why is Prowess an "ability" at all?

Primarily because of the ability most likely to subsume its uses: Coordination. Coordination is already used for dodging and ranged combat, along with all other physical actions not involving sheer Strength. Eliminating Prowess makes Coordination the be-all "physical action" ability. It also makes it more difficult to model the highly-coordinated hero who is not necessarily a master of all forms of close combat. Still, you can drop Prowess from the game and shift all of its uses to Coordination, making it much easier to view Coordination and Strength and an "acting" and "effect" pair of physical abilities. Be aware, however, that having a high Coordination becomes even more attractive.

Dropping Awareness

Awareness is differentiated from Intellect as the ability to notice and pick up on things, from simple sensory awareness to gut feelings, instinct, and intuition. It makes it easier to model both the "absent-minded professor" who is highly intelligent, but not overly aware, and the hero with the sharp senses and instincts who is not necessarily any smarter than anyone else.

Intellect is the ability most likely to take over the functions of Awareness. The sharp-eyed character is of average Intellect, with an appropriate Specialty in noticing things. The absent-minded professor is a bit more difficult, but still workable with a lower Intellect and more levels in Specialties like Science.

Dropping Willpower

Lastly, Willpower represents mental "strength" and resilence, as well as "force of personality". It is separate from the logic and quick-thinking of Intellect and the instinct of Awareness, but could be subsumed into either ability if Willpower was removed from the game. You could even make some Willpower tests with the higher (or the lower) of the two remaining mental abilities, if you wished, making Willpower a kind of "figured" ability.

The personality aspects of Willpower tend to work better with Awareness, which is also focused on dealing with one's surroundings, and tends to work in with the idea that willful comic book heroes (often focused on mental or mystical powers) also tend to be some of the most aware.

Stamina Variants

Stamina is intended as a simple means of tracking whether a character is up or down in a fight and how many hits a character can be expected to take of a certain damage level. The default calculations for Stamina take into account that some characters get taken out of fights fairly quickly but that Strength and Willpower are the prime factors to hanging in there, and that Determination (for recovery) plays a role. The following variants shift around some of these assumptions to better fit different views of what Stamina should be.

Variant Stamina Base

Rather than basing Stamina off of the sum of Strength and Willpower levels, you can choose to base it off of any two abilities, assuming they all play different roles in keeping a hero going in a fight (or lessening the severity of damage from attacks). These may be two set abilities—such as Strength and Coordination, or Intellect and Willpower—or two abilities determined on a case-by-case basis, such as each character's two highest abilities, whatever they may be. The latter case tends to mean more characters will have similar Stamina levels, given the two high abilities will tend to be in a narrower range.

Increased Stamina

If you find Stamina values too low in your game, causing conflicts to end too quickly (even in spite of using Determination for recovery), you may simply wish to increase everyone's starting Stamina value. Start by doubling the higher of Strength or Willpower and then adding the lower ability to it. So a hero with Strength 4 and Willpower 6 would have 16 Stamina: Double level 6 for Willpower (12) plus level 4 Strength. If that isn't sufficient, double both ability levels before adding them together. In this case the aforementioned hero would have 20 Stamina (Strength 4 + Willpower 6 = 10, doubled to 20).

If you're using a Variant Stamina Base, you can combine it with Increased Stamina, for example using three different abilities (Strength + Coordination + Willpower or Prowess + Coordination + Strength, for examples). You can make Stamina a summation of characters' physical or mental abilities, or even all six, although that can lead to greatly inflated Stamina levels.

Fixed Stamina

Rather than basing Stamina off of abilities, every character has the same, fixed, amount, say 10–20 points, depending on how long you want most fights to last. This option obviously most benefits characters with lower abilities, who get more Stamina out of it. It works best in conjunction with an option like Innate Invulnerability from Villainomicon (p. 13) where another factor determines characters' resistance to damage.

Victory Pyramid

The Victory Pyramid variant in the Conflict section later in this book can also be used in place of Stamina, if you wish, ignoring the Stamina damage of attacks and simply using their degree of success to add to the build-up of success towards victory. See the Conflict section for details.

Dice Variants

The following are some variants for die-rolling and handling die-rolls for tests in Icons.

Game Master Rolls

Icons is set up so only the players roll dice for tests, which focuses on the heroes actions: rather than "does the villain hit?" the question is "does the hero dodge (or evade, etc.)?"

This requires a bit of effort in terms of figuring out tests, however. Tests players normally make are "reversed" when it comes to other characters. For example, unlike the heroes making a Strength test to resist being slammed or stunned from an attack, for other characters, heroes make a damage test against the target's Strength to see if a slam or stun takes place. While freeing the GM up from rolling tests allows more attention to be paid elsewhere, some may not find it worth the effort in terms of how tests are figured.

It is just as easy to play Icons where the Game Master rolls tests just like the players do. In this case, the only real change is that most reactions the heroes would make (defensive actions like dodge or evade) become difficulties based on the appropriate ability for the attacking villain's test, just as they are when heroes attack villains. In general, take the rules for heroes making tests and apply them to everyone.

Example: *Punch and Electric Judy take on Count Malochio and the criminal Count's henchmen. When Punch and Judy throw punches, their players make Prowess tests against their foes' Prowess or Coordination. When it's the villains' turn, the GM makes a Prowess test for each of the thugs against a difficulty equal to the higher of heroes' Prowess or Coordination, and a Coordination test for Count Malochio's "evil eye" laser, including the villain's Expert level of Power Specialty.*

One change in this approach is, since heroes do not take "actions" to dodge, evade, etc., they can't much such defenses into determined efforts. The GM may wish to permit the spending of Determination to raise the difficulty imposed by such abilities, one Determination point per +2 increase.

Example: *Not wanting to get hit by the Count's "evil eye" Electric Judy's player spends Determination to dodge the attack. With the Count's test result, she needs a +3 increase in Coordination (including her Acrobatics Specialty) to reduce his effect enough for a miss. That costs her two points of Determination, but the attack is a clean miss.*

High-Drop

Rather than rolling one positive die and one negative die and adding the resulting numbers together to get a value from –5 to +5, a player can simply roll one positive die and one negative die, discard the die with the higher (absolute) number and use the remaining die as the modifier for the test.

Example: Sean rolls a 3 (positive) and a 5 (negative). He drops the 5 and applies a +3 modifier to the test. If he rolled a 6 (positive) and a 4 (negative), he would drop the 6 and apply a –4 modifier to the test.

Results where the dice come up the same number still result in a +0 modifier, since there is no "high" die. This method generates the same odds of any particular value as the roll-and-add method, and the same range of values (+5 to –5, since a 6 is always dropped as the highest value) but may be easier for some players to read quickly, since it does not require any addition, other than applying the modifier to the test

Fudge Dice

An "ancestor" of **Icons** is the Fudge RPG System (www.fudgerpg.com) which uses a set of four six-sided dice (called "Fudge dice") marked on each of two sides with a plus (+), a minus (–), and a blank or zero face. Rolled together, the four dice (abbreviated "4dF") give a value from +4 to –4 by adding up all of the top-facing sides.

You can use a set of Fudge dice to play **Icons** with some modifications in mind: note that Fudge dice produce a "steeper" bell curve than the 2d6 system of **Icons** (either the roll-and-add or high-drop approach), weighted more towards the middle or "0" result. Obviously, Fudge dice also do not produce +5 or –5 results, limiting the range of modifiers slightly. This approach may suit more realistic **Icons** games where a more reliable middle is sought while also limiting the more extreme results on either end of the spectrum.

Minimal Success

Icons recognizes three possible sucessful outcomes: moderate, major, and massive (**Icons**, p. 7). This option adds in a fourth, the minimal success.

In this case, an effect of exactly 0 results in a minimal outcome, which might be described as "successful, but..." or "you don't quite make it, but..." A minimal success is just that: the bare minimum to not be considered a failure. If a hero is leaping the span between two buildings, a moderate success means clearing the distance and landing on the opposite side, maybe wobbling a moment before regaining balance. A minimal success means grabbing the ledge on the opposite side and having to pull yourself up in your next panel! Minimal success makes effect 0 more of an "edge" outcome, right on the border between success and failure, and evens out the distribution of outcomes so moderate is 1–2, major 3–4, and massive is 5 or more.

As with all outcomes in **Icons**, the exact interpretation of minimal success is left up to the GM. A minimal success in conflict often comes out to be a graze (see Grazing under Conflict later in this book).

Also at the GM's option, a minimal success may be considered a "failure" when it comes to determined effort, that is, a hero who has only achieved a minimal success on a task which allows for multiple attempts may use determined effort on a follow-up attempt.

Massive Failure

Although **Icons** features varying degrees of success, failure is pretty much failure. This option changes that: when a player rolls a –5 on the dice and the effect of that roll is less than 0, the hero suffers from a massive failure. Essentially, in addition to the ordinary effects of failure on the test, the Game Master also gets to impose a challenge on the hero without awarding the player Determination, similar to a "free tag" (see Free Tags in the Maneuvers section, following). The guideline for a massive failure is "Whatever can go wrong, does."

Example: *Starhawk fires a stellar blast at a weaving aerial foe. Starhawk's player rolls a –5 on the dice and that modifier makes her final effect (compared against the difficulty of the target's Coordination) a –3, a massive failure! Not only does Starhawk miss her target, but the GM says that she accidentally strikes a radio tower on a building in the distance! The structurally compromised tower begins to topple over towards the street below, and Starhawk is left with a choice: does she save those she has endangered, or go after the fleeing villain?*

DETERMINATION

The following are some alternative ways of spending Determination from those given in the **Icons** rules.

Freeform Aspects

Aspects, both qualities and challenges, are important elements of the Determination system in **Icons** but it is possible to loosen restrictions on how aspects are handled in the game, even to the point of doing away with them altogether.

Aspects serve the following purposes:

- Tagging a quality is required in order to spend Determination (except for recovery).
- Compelling an aspect (quality or challenge) is required to earn Determination.

Both of these mechanical elements of the game can be handled without fixed or pre-established aspects. In the case of tagging, you can either ignore the requirement to tag an aspect, allowing players to spend Determination when and how they wish, or ask the player to come up with some suitable aspect or description on the spot, explaining how the Determination spent fits into the hero's concept. For example, what motivates the hero to make a determined effort (apart from the sheer desire to succeed)? How does the hero qualify for this particular stunt? And so forth.

Similarly, the Game Master can choose to make a compel out of any situation, simply by offering the player Determination in exchange for it, rather than relying on a fixed list of challenges. Heroes might have previously established challenges that have come up in play before, but you can invent new ones on the spot, so long as the player is agreeable. This already exists somewhat in the form of temporary challenges (see Gaining Determination, p. 81 of Icons) and can be expanded to include all challenges in the game.

For some players and game groups, coming up with aspects during play (**Icons**, p. 78) may be easier than creating a fixed list of qualities and challenges in advance. Thinking about them in advance is intended as a tool to help flesh out characters by getting players to consider what their qualities and challenges are, but such choices should not be considered written in stone. Even in a game with relatively fixed aspects, players should have the option to change around their heroes' qualities and challenges, perhaps in-between game sessions or even chapters of a game, to suit the ongoing development of their characters as the story progresses.

Maneuvers

In addition to or in place of the set of maneuvers described on pages 67–69 of **Icons**, you can use the following system of maneuvers to expand player options for creative use of their heroes' abilities.

A character can take a panel and make a test with an appropriate ability to place a temporary aspect on another character or situation and then tag that aspect much like any other (see Tagging, p. 78 of **Icons**). The difficulty of the initial ability test is set by the GM or based on an appropriate ability of the target of the maneuver. Moderate success results in a "fragile" aspect that lasts for only one tag then disappears. Major or better success on the test results in a "lasting" aspect that persists for the entire chapter and can be tagged multiple times.

Abilities

The ability used to perform a maneuver depends entirely on what the maneuver is, its intended result, and the judgment of the GM. Players are encouraged to be creative, as always, when coming up with maneuvers and their intended results and GMs are encouraged to be generous and flexible. The following examples just scratch the surface of the range of possibilities:

- Prowess: Prowess maneuvers reflect using the hero's close combat skill to establish an advantage over a foe through positioning, clever feinting or footwork, superior knowledge of technique, and so forth.

- Coordination: Coordination maneuvers apply the hero's speed, agility, and accuracy to provide an advantage, perhaps tripping an opponent up, or getting a solid targetting "lock" or "bead".

- Strength: A Strength maneuver could inflict some minor but key damage to a target (creating a taggable weak point or flaw), shift the field of conflict by knocking down walls or obstacles, or impress a foe enough to cause hesitation or the like.

- Intellect: Intellect is a useful ability for maneuvers, reflecting things like quick calculation of odds, figuring out weaknesses or coming up with brilliant tactics ("I've got a plan!").

- Awareness: Awareness likewise applies well to maneuvers, representing insight into previously unseen openings or weaknesses, picking up on small details, reading an opponents moves and mood, and so forth.

- Willpower: Willpower maneuvers can represent direct "tests of will" pitting the hero against a foe, intimidation attempts to throw someone off balance, or such sheer strength of will that an opponent is taken aback, placing the hero at an advantage.

- Powers: It would take considerable space to go into all the many ways the different powers in Icons could be used for maneuvers. Sufficient to say that each power has particular situations where it is suitable for performing certain types of maneuvers. Offensive powers tend to work like Prowess and Strength, while alteration and defensive powers are more like Willpower. Movement powers resemble Coordination (for speed and agility) whereas Sensory powers are like Awareness. Ultimately, the player proposes a maneuver, the GM decides if it is suitable and, if so, the power's level is used for the maneuver test.

- Specialties: At the GM's option, specialties can provide their bonus for maneuver tests with appropriate abilities. A Prowess maneuver can certainly benefit from the Martial Arts specialty, for example, just as a Coordination maneuver might benefit from Acrobatics, or an Intellect maneuver from the Military specialty (concerning tactics), and so forth. As with other abilities, the GM decides if a particular specialty applies to the maneuver as the player describes it.

Free Tags

A successful maneuver gives the character who placed the aspect one "free" opportunity to tag it, gaining the benefit of spending one point of Determination without actually having to spend any. This only works for uses of Determination requiring tags (which is to say all but Recover). The free tag only works once, regardless of how long the temporary aspect lasts; any further tagging of that aspect requires the normal spending of Determination.

If the character who placed the aspect belongs to a team Determination pool (see Team Determination, p. 19 of Icons) then the character may choose to transfer the free tag to any other character belonging to that pool. A character may only benefit from one free tag per test, regardless of the number available; so a team of six characters could not transfer five free tags to one member to use all at once.

Example: *Prometheus makes a test using his Precognition to place the aspect "Foreseen Flaw" on Sigma-9. His player rolls the test against difficulty 6 (chosen by the GM based on Sigma-9's Awareness and Willpower) and gets a moderate success. Prometheus' player chooses to transfer the free tag from the fragile aspect to the team Determination pool so one of his teammates can exploit it to help take the sinister Sigma down.*

Sharing free tags via a team determination pool is a useful opportunity for heroes with the Leadership specialty (Icons, p. 25) to use it as part of a Willpower maneuver to direct teammates for maximum effect: the leader makes a Willpower test (applying Leadership bonus) to apply a suitable aspect like "Tactical Advantage" or "Effective Teamwork" and transfers the free tag to another hero on the team. If the leader places a lasting aspect, other heroes can spend Determination to tag it later in the chapter.

Resisting Maneuvers

Villains and other characters controlled by the Game Master can also use maneuvers. In this case, simply reverse the process described previously: the player rolls a test as a reaction using the appropriate resisting ability, chosen by the GM. This sets the difficulty of the maneuver, which is compared against the maneuvering character's ability level to determine the outcome.

Example: *ConfederApe attempts to use his Prowess and Athletics to apply an "off-balance" aspect to All-American Girl. The GM decides her Coordination (plus Acrobatics specialty) is the ability to oppose it: All-American Girl's player rolls a Coordination test and gets an effort of 5. Compared to ConfederApe's difficulty of 8 (for Prowess 6 and Expert Athletics) that is an outcome of 3, a major success for the villain. ConfederApe has All-American Girl off-balance for the rest of this chapter and gets a free tag for that aspect. Look out, America's Sweetheart!*

Once an aspect is applied to a hero by a maneuver, the GM compels that aspect just like a regular challenge: the player has the option of refusing the Determination that comes with the compel and spending a point of Determination to prevent the challenge from coming into play (see Icons, p. 78). If a player takes this option against the free tag gained by a villain for imposing the aspect, then the villain retains the free tag and may use it later, as long as the aspect lasts.

Example: *After ConfederApe throws All-American Girl off-balance with his maneuver, he follows up*

on his next turn, using the free tag to increase the difficulty for her to resist his attack. All-American Girl's player decides to spend a point of Determination to negate the compel, keeping the difficulty for her Coordination test to dodge at the original level, but ConfederApe retains the free tag against the off-balance aspect, which remains for the rest of the chapter.

Eliminating Imposed Aspects

Normally, a temporary aspect applied via a maneuver lasts for an amount of time based on the outcome of the maneuver test, either a page or an entire chapter. At the Game Master's discretion, characters can perform a "counter maneuver" to remove an applied aspect before it expires. A moderate outcome on the countering maneuver test negates the applied aspect for one page, while a major or better outcome removes it entirely.

Example: *Needing to regain her footing, All-American Girl takes an action to test against ConfederApe's Prowess (plus Athletics) once again. This time, however, she takes to the air and asks the GM to use her Flight level for the maneuver, modified by her Acrobatics. The GM agrees, the player rolls, and gets an effort of 11, compared to the Ape's difficulty of 8. That's a major success and removes the "off-balance" aspect altogether. All-American Girl is ready to come back swinging!*

Existing Maneuvers

The system of maneuvers presented her can subsume some of the maneuvers described on pages 67–69 of **Icons**, while others remain situational modifiers applied to actions.

Aerial Combat	Aerial combat remains a situational modifier in terms of slams and stuns. At the GM's discretion, the modifier for diving attacks could be converted into a maneuver (imposing the aspect "lower ground" "inferior position" or the like) from the action where the character climbs up for the dive.
Aiming	Aiming can be converted into a maneuver using Coordination or Awareness to place a "targeted" aspect on the target, which can be tagged for determined effort on an attack.
Called Shots	Called shots typically remain modifiers, changing the outcome of an attack, rather than placing an aspect on a target.
Combined Attacks	Combined attacks remain a modifier to attack damage as described.
Immobile Targets	Immobilizing or hindering a target's movement could become a maneuver, taggable for determined effort on a follow-up attack.
Interposing	Interposing remains unchanged.
Limited Visibility	Limiting a foe's visibility or other senses can become a maneuver, imposing a "limited visibility" or "blinded" type of aspect which can be tagged.
Luring	Luring or tricking an opponent can become a maneuver to impose a "tricked" or "enraged" aspect, or something similar, which can then be tagged.
Multiple Targets	Multiple targets remains a situational modifier.
Pulling Punches	Pulling punches remains a modifier to an attack's effect.
Shooting to Stun	Likewise, shooting to stun remains a modifier to attack effect.
Surprise Attack	A surprise attack can become a maneuver—using Coordination or a similar ability—to place a "surprised" aspect on the target.
Underwater Combat	Underwater combat remains a situational modifier, although characters can also attempt manevuers to impose aspects that reflect a target's disorientation or hindrance underwater, adding it on top of the existing modifier.

Pyramid Tests

The following option is mentioned in **The Sidereal Schemes of Dr. Zodiac** adventure and offered in **The Villainomicon**, where it was referred to as the "Success Pyramid". It is presented here with some additional options and examples.

When heroes are confronted with a complex task, rather than requiring a single pass/fail test, the GM can set up a success "pyramid" for the task, where in a single test can succeed, but multiple smaller successes can also accumulate to accomplish the task, allowing for teamwork and the combination of different abilities or approaches.

Essentially, accomplishing the task requires a massive success against the chosen difficulty: an effect of 5 or more when difficulty is subtracted from the effort (ability level + die modifier) of the test. However, lesser outcomes can add up to greater outcomes to build a "pyramid" of success. Two major outcomes add up to a massive success, while two moderate outcomes add up to a major success. Thus four moderate outcomes add up to two major outcomes, which add up to the needed massive success.

The tests used to achieve the outcomes can be whatever the players think up and the GM permits. So if the task involves an investigation, for example, some of the tests might be Intellect-based analyses of evidence, while others are Awareness-based searches for clues, and still others are Willpower-based interrogations or efforts at persuasion. The tests can be carried out by one hero in succession or several heroes at once.
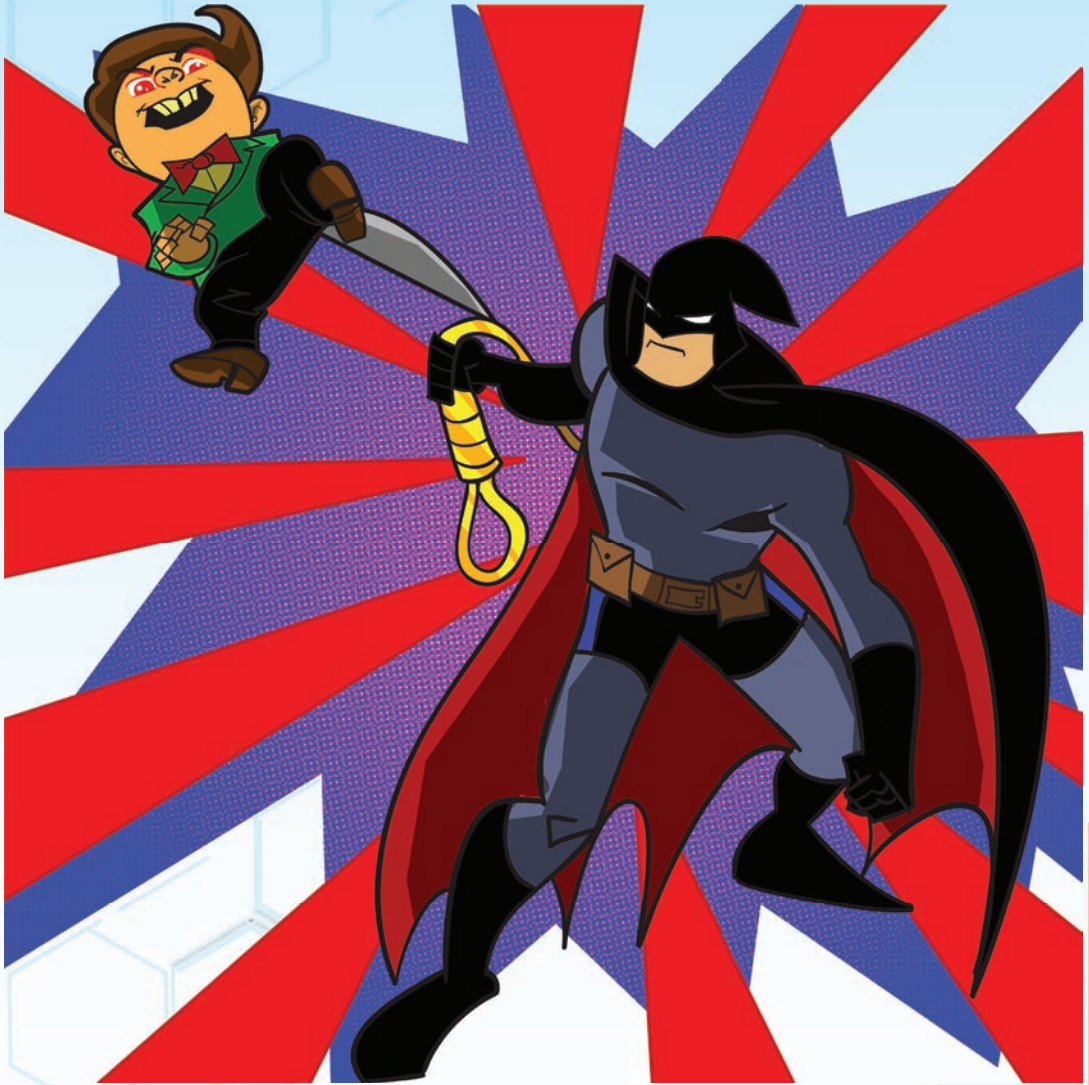
You can get a lot of flexibility out of varying the difficulties involved in a pyramid test and choosing different abilities to make the actual tests to cover a wide range of situations and challenges.

Try the following variations on the pyramid test to "fine tune" it to different types of challenges:

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Balanced

If a certain number of failures accumulate before the required successful outcome, the pyramid test "tips" and is considered a failure. So, for example, a pyramid test might require a massive success against difficulty 6 before three total failures accumulate to tip it.

Competitive

Two or more sides are in a race to complete their success pyramid and whichever side completes their first wins. Thus everyone involved in the competitive test is under time pressure created by their compeitition (but not fixed timing like a timed test, see the following).

Costly

There is a "cost" associated with attempting each pyramid test, or with failing an attempt. This might be a loss of Stamina, reflecting actual injury or increasing fatigue, a loss of levels in one or more abilities, or a free compel for the GM, either using one of the character's existing challenges or the imposition of a temporary challenge without awarding the player any Determination (**Icons**, p. 76).

Escalating

The longer the test goes on, the more difficult it becomes: each failure (or attempt) on the pyramid test increases its difficulty, usually by +1.

Fragile

Successes accumulated and added to the pyramid do not necessarily stay there. Opposition can remove successes from the pyramid, causing it to "shrink" and making achieving the final outcome more difficult. Essentially, the opposition's success subtracts at the same ratio, a moderate success removes a moderate success, or converts a major success to one moderate (removing the other). In this way, two sides can struggle, one building up the success pyramid, the other tearing it down.

Long

The test requires two massive successes, which can be accumulated through lesser successes, as usual. So even a single massive success does not complete the task all at once. This is useful for drawing out a pyramid test so no one roll, no matter how successful, can complete it.

Short

The pyramid test requires only a major success, or a total of two moderate outcomes to add up to a major success. Good for tests a bit more complex than a typical pass/fail test but not as demanding as a full massive success pyramid test.

Timed

There are a limited number of chances to accumulate the needed outcomes on the test, perhaps due to a time constraint. If the needed outcomes are not achieved after so many attempts, the

pyramid test automatically fails. By definition, the final opportunity to attempt the test is open to determined effort (**Icons**, p. 79).

Triggered

Each failure or attempt on the test triggers some occurance. This can be anything from a trap or security system to a magical curse or unfortunate happenstance like a shifting rock falling down on the hero. Note that incremental events (moving a step closer to some disaster) is better handled as a balanced or timed test. A triggered test assumes something happens when the trigger is tripped.

Wide

A wide test requires more successful outcomes at lower levels to add up to a higher level outcome. For example, rather than four moderate outcomes adding up to two major outcomes, which equal one massive outcome (a 4:2:1 ratio) a wide test might have a 5:3:1 ratio, or even a 6:2:1 ratio, where moderate outcomes are valued less, but major outcomes remain the same. The last value in the ratio should remain 1 (for a single massive success) unless the test is also long (see previous).

You can apply multiple modifiers to a pyramid test, so long as they are not mutually exclusive. So it is possible to have a costly escalating timed test, for example, or a balanced triggered test (where the triggered things get progressively worse until the test finally fails). Mix-and-match to create interesting challenges for the players and their heroes!

CONFLICT

A number of options can add variability to conflicts or change how they are handled to suit particular styles of play. Most of these options make conflicts more detailed, but also more complex, so try them out in your own games before implenting them as standard rules.

Counter-Attacks

The normal Evading action (**Icons**, p. 57) just results in a miss if you successfully evade. With this option, a successful enough Prowess test against an attack means the defender hits the attacker instead! Treat the success as one outcome less than normal. So a counter-attack can have the following outcomes:

Effect	Outcome
–5 or less	The attacker hits the defender wth a massive success.
–3 to –4	The attacker hits the defender with a major success.
–1 to –2	The attacker hits the defender with a moderate success.
0 to 2	The defender evades the attack.
3 to 4	The defender evades the attack and hits the attacker with a moderate success.
5+	The defender evades the attack and hits the attacker with a major success.

Example: *The Hangman (Prowess 6, Martial Arts) is up against a group of six thugs (Prowess 2). The thugs rush to the attack and Hangman makes a Prowess test against each, rolling against his level 7 versus difficulty 2. On a roll of 0 or better, he'll hit a thug for 3 damage (his Strength level) and a possible slam result. A roll of –1 or –2 and he hits the thug for just the Stamina damage. On a roll of –3 to –5, he simply evades, but does not hit. Note that Hangman can't roll poorly enough for one of the thugs to hit him: the GM would have to compel a challenge for that to happen.*

So when the first rush breaks against Hangman's mastery of unarmed combat and he has flung three of the thugs away, its his turn to take on the remaining three...

This variant makes taking on a more capable opponent in close combat a much riskier venture, since a failed attack can result in a successful counter-attack. It also effectively models how skilled heroes take on groups of lesser foes, since their attacks give the heroes additional chances to take them out!

Grazing

This option adds an additional outcome to damaging attacks: the graze. With an effect of exactly 0 on a damaging attack (see Tests, p. 6–7 of **Icons**) the attacker scores a graze: the final Stamina damage of the attack (after reductions for armor) is halved, rounding down, with a minimum of 1 point. A graze can still have a significant effect, particularly for a high-level attack against a target without much Stamina, but its impact is lessened. An effect of 1–2 still results in a moderate outcome, with all the other outcomes remaining the same.

Example: *Corsair Queen slashes at Atomic Roach with her glowing cutlass, and the result of the dodge test by the Roach's player is an effect of 0 on the attack, a graze. Corsair Queen's cutlass normally does 5 damage, but this is halved to 2 (2.5, rounded down), so the Roach only takes a 2 Stamina scratch of his 14 Stamina, rather than the full 5 points. Better keep dodging, bug!*

Lethality

A simple way to up the lethality of **Icons** is to add the following option: all attacks that can inflict a possible Killing result (slashing and shooting attacks, essentally) automatically do so when a target is reduced to 0 Stamina (in addition to on a massive success) unless the attacker specifically uses the Shoot to Stun option (**Icons**, p. 68). A target reduced to 0 Stamina by one of these attacks must make an immediate Strength test against the attack's damage level. See Killing on p. 70 of **Icons** for results.

Stances

Stances are page-to-page trade-offs characters make between related abilities reflecting their stance or tactics: sacrificing accuracy for sheer power, for example, or attacking with abandon with less regard for defense. The modifier for a stance is 1 or 2, chosen at the time it is adopted. Characters can only adopt one stance at time and its effect last for the page until the character's next turn, when it can be changed. Unless the player specifies otherwise, assume the character remains in the last chosen stance.

Neutral

A neutral stance is technically no stance at all, in that it applies no modifiers. Characters in a neutral stance use their normal abilities in tests. It is provided simply to differentiate it from other stances.

Defensive

In a defensive stance, the character gains a bonus (+1 or +2) to tests for defensive actions like blocking, doding, or evading, but suffers a similar penalty (–1 or –2) to tests for offensive actions like bashing and blasting.

OFFENSIVE

The opposite of a defensive stance, the character gains a bonus (+1 or +2) to tests for offensive actions, suffering the same penalty to defensive actions.

POWER

This stance focuses on power over precision, so the character suffers a penalty (–1 or –2) to tests for offensive actions to hit an opponent, but gains the same amount as a bonus (+1 or +2) to the level of the attack. This is usually damage, although it can also apply to the level of certain other offensive powers at the GM's discretion, provided that "pushing" the power for more effect at the cost of less accuracy makes sense in contex.

PRECISION

The opposite of the power stance, this focuses on precision over power. The character gains a bonus (+1 or +2) to tests for offensive actions to hit an opponent, but suffers a penalty (–1 or –2) to the level of the attack's effect. Again, this is usually damage, but could apply to other offensive powers, if the GM agrees.

Consequences

Consequences are an optional expansion of the concept of Lasting Injuries (**Icons**, p. 72) which give players some additional narrative and tactical options in conflicts. In essence, when a character suffers Stamina damage, players may choose to take on a temporary damage-related challenge in exchange for a lessening of the damage level, allowing the character to remain in the conflict longer. The severity of the consequence determines how long it lasts and how much damage it eliminates:

- A moderate consequence reduces Stamina damage by 2 points and lasts for the duration of the chapter or until treated in some fashion determined by the GM.

- A major consequence reduces Stamina damage by 5 points and lasts for the duration of the game session.

- A massive consequence reduces Stamina damage by 10 points and lasts for multiple game sessions (at least two).

The challenge imposed by the consequence can be anything agreed upon by the player and GM, ranging from things like concussion or sprain to muscle pull, fracture, contusion, or even more exotic "injuries" related to a character's powers or even mental state. For example, a consequence of a particular attack might be some kind of mental trauma, leaving a "flashback" or "traumatized" challenge as a consequence.

So long as the temporary challenge is in place, the GM can tag it like any other challenge, and the first tag in each chapter is free, not awarding the player Determination (see Free Tags under Maneuvers).

Example: *While fighting Gila-Master, Saguaro suffers 6 points of burning damage from one of the sinister shaman's spells; since that would potentially take him out of the fight, Saguaro's player offers take apply a major consequence—"crippled"—to Saguaro, for the arm that reached into Gila-Master's fiery aura. The GM agrees and Saguaro lessens the damage by 5 to only 1 Stamina, allowing him to stay in the fight long enough to triumph. Later, however, as Saguaro is trying to clamber down the side of a sheer mesa, the GM tags his crippled challenge to increase the difficulty, and Saguaro's player gets no Determination due to the free tag. When the GM tags it again during the confrontation with the criminal gang as the base of the mesa, she awards Saguaro's player a point of Determination normally, since it is the second tag in the same chapter.*

Characters may only have one consequence of each level of severity at a time. If all three levels are currently "filled" the character can take on no further consequences to lessen Stamina damage.

CONSEQUENCES AND GAME MASTER CHARACTERS

Game Master characters can also use consequences to lessen Stamina damage, much like heroes

do. The GM announces that a character is doing so and the nature of the challenge applied by the consequence. The heroes get one free tag against the temporary challenge per chapter as a group, that is, one free tag total rather than one per hero.

Example: *In a confrontation with the heroes, the GM chooses to applythe major consequence "rattled" to the Octofather, representing a blow that leaves him reeling. When the heroes catch up with the fleeing villain, one of them can tag the rattled challenge without spending Determination, but any further tags that chapter cost Determination as usual.*

Free Recovery

If you want to give heroes a bit more of an edge, allow free uses of the recover option for Determination (**Icons**, p. 80) so they can get back more Stamina during conflicts. You can limit free recovery in the following ways. Choose the ones that work best for your game and group, but choose at least one, since otherwise the heroes get unlimited free recoveries any time they want!

- Heroes get a limited number of free recoveries per conflict, from just one to a set amount (two or more) to a value based on one of the hero's abilities or something like starting Determination (so a hero with starting Determination 1 gets one free recovery, but the hero with starting Determination 4 gets four).

- Using a free recovery takes up the hero's action for that page.

- Getting a free recovery requires an appropriate maneuver (see Maneuvers, previously) much like a free tag. As with other maneuvers, the GM sets the appropriate ability and difficulty, ranging from Strength or Willpower to using another ability to buy the hero a "breather" or a "second wind". In this case, heroes may even be able to perform recovery maneuvers for each other, transfering the free recovery via their Team Determination pool (see Free Tags in the Maneuvers section).

Victory Pyramid

You can extend the pyramid test concept (previously) to successful outcomes in conflicts as well. Rather than simply beating-down an opponent's Stamina, a massive success could also overcome an opponent, with different abilities and tests contributing. This could be a matter of psyching-out a foe, using technical skills to defeat a device, performing a mystic ritual, or some other form of indirect conflict.

Examples: *A group of four heroes—Arctic Fire, Bolide, Anansi, and Hangman—face off against the rogue robot Skeletron. The heroes need to achieve a massive success to defeat him, difficult given Skeleton's capabilities. The heroes leap into action!*

Hangman attempts to bind Skeletron with the Noose of Justice; his player rolls a major success against Skeletron's Coordination and binds him. Arctic Fire and Bolide both blast the robot, although they both hit, neither overcomes Skeletron's level 8 armor, so neither attack contributes towards success. Anansi uses the distraction to sneak around, making a Coordination (+Stealth) test against Skeletron's Awareness: a major success, but also not yet a contribution to victory.

For his action, Skeletron breaks free of Hangman's noose, his Strength 8 against its level 7 making it a fairly easy matter. The GM rules that removes Hangman's contribution: the heroes are back at square one! Time to start getting innovative.

"Bolide! Pin him down!" Hangman calls out. Bolide responds by using his Gravity Control against Skeletron, scoring a moderate success to hold him in place.

"Arctic Fire, heat the outer casing! Impede his processors!" The Acetylene Alaskan does so, using his Fire Control, and getting a major success! He uses it as a maneuver to apply a "Slowed" aspect to Skeletron, which will last for the rest of the chapter (or until the villain counteracts it). The maneuver, however, does not directly contribute to the victory pyramid count.

"Foolish humans!" Skeletron sneers, "You cannot... harm me... in this fashion!"

"Really?" Arctic Fire says, "sounds like you're slowing up a little there, metalhead!"

Hangman's player tells the GM: "I'm going to give a silent signal to Anansi with just a slight nod, telling her to go ahead. Can I make a test to coordinate and help take Skeletron off-guard?"

"Yes," the GM says. "Test your Intellect against Skeletron's Awareness."

"Use the free tag on the Slowed aspect!" Arctic Fire's player adds.

"Good idea! Can I use it for determined effort?" The GM shakes her head.

"No, you haven't tried this before and it isn't really your one shot," she says. So Hangman's player just makes the test solo, getting a moderate success.

"That's two moderates," Bolide's player adds, "which gives us one major success, right?" The GM nods again.

"Here goes nothing," Anansi's player mutters. "Okay, I want to use the free tag from the Slowed aspect, if I can, but for a power stunt to cast not just a usual illusionary web over Skeletron, but to interface his slowed AI with the fear and panic of everybody nearby, and even the hope and compassion of the rescue workers and ordinary people helping out. The idea is that the human emotion will be too much and overwhelm him."

"Cool," the GM says. "I'd say you're only going to get one chance at it. Do you want to make it a determined effort, too?"

"Yes!" Anansi's player says. "I'll tag my 'Web of Influence' aspect for it and go for a major success."

Anansi's player tests against Skeletron's Willpower and gets an effect of 1, a moderate success, so she expends a point of Determination, taking that to 3 for a major success. Added to the existing major success the heroes cap the pyramid with a massive success!

"Error! Emotional input... processors slowing... Error! Nooooo haaaaarm..." Skeletron's overwhelmed systems shut down.

Battlesuits & Military Vehicles

Battlesuits

Why have a tank or a fighter-jet when you can wear one? Comic book heroes and villains often have battlesuits, also known as power armor or power suits, devices granting their wearer a range of powers. Often a battlesuit-wearer is a Gimmick origin (**Icons**, p. 10), with all powers coming from the device.

Battlesuits tend to provide powers in five main areas: Protection, Mobility, Strength, Weapons, and Sensors.

Protection

A battlesuit's first and often main function is to protect the wearer from harm with various defensive powers. Most are Invulnerability devices. Indeed, the Invulnerability device option in Icons allows the player to turn the device into a battlesuit.

Some battlesuits rely on a Force Field instead. In the case of a Force Field device, the GM may wish to ask for an Intellect or Coordination test rather than a Willpower test to keep a battlesuit's force field operational after a stun outcome, reflecting the wearer's expertise with the suit's overloading systems, rather than an exercise in concentration.

Some battlesuits also provide Resistance or even Immunity on top of their armor. A suit designed for fighting fires, for example, might offer Fire Resistance whereas a suit for arctic exploration might provide Cold Resistance. Full Immunity is considerably rarer for battlesuits, since technological systems don't often provide it.

Lastly, a battlesuit may offer its wearer Life Support. A space-capable suit, for example, has at least Life Support 4 to deal with the vacuum, cold, radiation, and airlessness of space.

Mobility

A battlesuit often provides its wearer some means of getting around using movement powers. In some cases, it is as simple as enhanced Strength (see Strength, following) allowing the wearer to jump further and climb more easily. More often, the suit has some sort of mobility system.

Like heroic movement powers, the most common is Flight, using rockets, anti-gravity, glider wings, or some other means of propulsion. An underwater suit provides the Aquatic power, while one designed for underground exploration might have Burrowing. More exotic battlesuits can have other movement powers, like a "stealth" suit with Swinging and Wall-Crawling, or a "boom suit" with Teleportation.

Strength

Battlesuits often enhance their wearer's Strength, using motors or even force fields that mimic and magnify the wearer's movements. This is simply a device for a hero's superhuman Strength level, typically 7 or higher, but it could apply to a lower level of Strength; the battlesuit magnifies it, just not as much. So, for example, a hero might have Strength 6 while wearing the suit, but only Strength 3 (or even less!) out of it. Some heroes have Strength-related challenges or physical disabilities without their armor.

Weapons

Weapon systems put the "battle" into the "suit" with different offensive powers. By far the most common is Blast, ranging from bashing force beams to shooting lasers or machine guns. Explosive

Blasts for missles or energy bombs are not unusual.

Binding weapons may shoot steams of fast-hardening glue or resin, or masses of sticky fibers. Blinding weapons might be strobes, flash bombs, sonic "screamers" or similar devices. An Aura may electrify or super-heat the surface of the suit, damaging anyone touching it.

Other offensive powers might be built into a battlesuit as weapons. Paralysis can be a taser-like weapon, while Strike might be gauntlets with spikes (slashing) or kinetic strikers (bashing). Exotic suits might even have Affliction or Life Drain weapons!

Sensors

Lastly, a battlesuit may have various sensor devices built-in, typically as part of the mask or helmet with a heads-up display, although the sensors themselves could be embedded in other parts of the suit.

Various Supersenses are the most common: from infrared and ultravision vision to sonar, radar, or other electromagnetic scanners. A built-in radio or communications system is a common feature, or different enhanced or extended senses.

An Interface power can represent the suit's ability to connect to other computer systems, and Detection provides more exotic sensors calibrated to specific phenomena. Other sensory powers tend to be more unusual and not included in technological battlesuits (although they can and do show up in magical suits).

Sample Battlesuits

The following are just a few examples of possible battlesuit configurations. The options are as wide as your imagination; virtually any Gimmick origin character could derive powers from a battlesuit device.

HEX: Extra Arms 6, Invulnerability 3, Leaping 6, Strength 6, Wall-Crawling 6

An insect-like design, the HEX armor has four additional robotic limbs along the torso and allows the wearer to scuttle along vertical surfaces and leap considerable distances.

Mastermind: Invulnerability 5, Life Support 8 (all but eating and sleeping), Wizardry (Gadgets) 9 (Blast, Force Field), Strength 5

This advanced battlesuit is the product of alien or futuristic technology or sheer inventive genius, protecting the wearer with a nigh-impenetrate force screen and equipped with a highly adapable range of devices. It is suitable for a master villain, granting physical powers to match a towering intellect (and ego!).

Phantom: Invisibility 6, Phasing 6

The Phantom armor uses a dimensional phase-shift that allows the wearer to become invisible or even intangible, able to pass through solid objects. Unfortunately, the phase-shift technology is flawed: long term use causes paranoid hallucinations and eventually a complete mental breakdown.

SPARTAN: Aura 6 (electrified outer surface), Blast 5 (shooting, machine gun), Blast 7 (shooting, main arm-cannon), Invulnerability 7, Life Support 7 (all but eating, sleeping, and vacuum), Strength 8.

The SPARTAN (SPecial ARmored TANk) battlesuit is an prototype, built by Avatar Industries, for a military suit able to provide a single soldier with the power of an entire tank.

TITAN: Growth 4, Life Support 8 (all but eating and sleeping), Invulnerability 8, Strength 9

The massive TITAN armor is more than 20 feet tall, based on a heavy construction design adapted for combat. Although the armor's Strength is a considerable weapon, it may also have weapon mounts for Blast attacks or other offensive powers.

Option: Battlesuit Origin

To reflect the unity of the battlesuit design, **Icons** Game Masters can allow the following origin option:

A Gimmick origin may choose for the hero's gimmick to be a battlesuit. The hero automatically gains either the Invulnerability or Force Field power (choose one or roll a die for it: 1–4 = Invulernability, 5–6 = Force Field) and may choose to apply the Gimmick's usual +2 to one mental ability to that power's level instead.

All of the hero's other powers are incorporated into the armor. If a generated power does not work as an armor system, the player may choose a movement, offensive, or sensory power as a bonus power to replace it with the GM's permission.

Military Vehicles

Icons Game Masters may want to measure the capabilities of a villain or monster against conventional military forces, since they are often the ones that face-off against them before the heroes get a chance to intervene. This section looks at sample military vehicles in **Icons** game terms.

Crew

Most vehicles have a minimum crew needed to operate them. Crew members are assumed to be trained in how to handle the vehicle, with no particular specialty, although the GM can assign elite or specially-trained crews specialty levels with the vehicle and its systems. Untrained personnel (including heroes!) trying to operate a military vehicle may need to make an Intellect test (Difficulty 4 or higher) to figure out how to make it work.

Sensors

Military vehicles make extensive use of sensor systems, particular radar, sonar, and lasers for detecting and pinpointing targets. Characters with the appropriate Elemental Control (Electrical or Magnetic for radar, Sound for sonar, and Light for lasers) able to move or shape the element can fool these sensor systems with a power test against the level of the sensor (typically 3 to 5). This can leave vehicles "blind" save for the visual capabilities of their crews.

Structure

A vehicle's Structure is used as its material Strength for resisting damage and determining how difficult it is to break through the vehicle. Structure takes into account that vehicles ar eoften complex mechanisms, not just solid blocks of material.

Speed

A vehicle's speed is used just like a level in the appropriate movement power for its movement.

Targeting

A military vehicle's Targeting measures a combination of on-board targeting systems and the average pilot or gunner's capability in using them. It is generally used to measure the difficulty for heroes to avoid the vehicle's attacks.

Bombing

Some aircraft drop munitions on targets from above. Aiming the drop is a Targeting test with a –1 penalty for the aircraft's movement, unless it is hovering over the target.

Strafing

Aircraft often strafe targets on the ground, firing weapons at them while flying past. A strafing attack is a Targeting test against all targets along the flight path, but suffers the usual –1 penalty for supplemental action due to the vehicle's continued movement.

Major & Massive Hits

Military vehicles are often heavily armored, making it difficult even for heroes to damage them unless they have powerful attacks. Since vehicles are not characters, major and massive success with attacks against them can have different effects.

The GM may wish to consider the called shots rule for a major hit, allowing the attacker to take out some vulnerable part of the vehicle, like an external weapon system, hinge, antenna, sensor suite, or the like. Similarly, a massive hit may manage to damage or destroy a vital system: drive train, engine, or the like, even if the vehicle is otherwise undamaged. See the individual vehicle descriptions for suggestions.

Tank

Structure 6, Speed 2, Targetting 4

A main battle tank has a crew of four and requires Strength 8 to lift it.

Armaments: Main cannon (shooting damage 7) and machine gun (shooting damage 5), mounted on a rotating 360-degree turret. Anti-aircraft gun (shooting damage 6).

Hits: Major hits on a tank may include the antenna, headlights, or one of the external guns. A massive hit may kill the engine, damage one of the treads, or the drivetrain.

Fighter Jet

Structure 5, Speed 8, Targetting 5

A fighter-bomber like the American F-16 has a crew of one (the pilot) along with room for a co-pilot. It requires Strength 7 to lift it.

Some "jump-jet" designs (like the American Harrier AV-8) have vertical take off and landing (VTOL) capabilities.

Armaments: Cannon (shooting damage 5) and air-to-air missiles (see Missiles) that do level 6 explosive damage.

Hits: Major hits to a fighter jet can include the external weapons, damage to the canopy, or to the control surfaces (forcing the plane to land). A massive hit takes out the engine, causing the plane to crash.

Submarine

Structure 6, Speed 4, Targetting 5

A submarine like the US Ohio-class, has a crew of 150. It is powered by an on-board nuclear reactor, giving it essentially unlimited range. It takes Strength 10 in order to lift such a massive vessel.

Armaments: Acoustic homing torpedoes (shooting damage 7) and either cruise missiles or intercontinental ballistic missiles (see Missiles).

Hits: Major hits to a submarine may damage the periscope or sensor systems (surface radar or underwater sonar). A massive hit can take out the main propellers or result in a hull breach, flooding the interior (see Aquatic Adventures).

DESTROYER

Structure 6, Speed 4, Targetting 4

A Naval escort vessel, a destroyer has a crew of 200. It take Strength 9 or 10 to lift it.

Armaments: Two missile launchers (see Missiles), two cannons (shooting damage 5), two acoustic homing torpedo launchers (shooting damage 7).

Hits: Major hits against a destroyer include surface equipment like radar and communications dishes, deck-mounted weapons, and even exposed crew members on the deck. A massive hit can take out a weapons system or one of the main propellers, halving the ship's Speed (taking out both leaves the ship unable to move under its own power).

BOMBS & MISSILES

Missiles are essentially one-shot vehicles carrying a type of payload, typically an explosive or chemical warhead.

Missile Abilities

Missiles are governed by three abilities: Structure, Speed, and Targetting.

Structure measure's the missile's structural integrity, the same as a vehicle, and functions like material strength in terms of damage directed against the missile.

Speed is how fast the missile travels, like a level of the Flight power. It is used for attempts to catch up to or outrun the missile.

Targeting is the missile's ability to "lock on" to and track a target. Attempts to evade a missile use its Targetting as the difficulty.

Payloads

A missile can carry one of several types of payloads:

Explosive payloads inflict shooting damage 7 to targets close to the missile's point of impact.

Incendiary payloads inflict shooting damage 7 to targets close to the missile's point of impact, followed by shooting damage 4 each page thereafter, until extinguished.

Nuclear missiles carry a fission or fusion bomb, capable of massive damage. You can consider a nuke off the scale (Icons, p. 5) in most cases, assuming anything in the blast radius is annihilated. A target with a combination of at least Invulnerability 9+ and Life Support that includes Heat, Pressure, and Radiation (or Immunityto all of those) may survive a nuclear blast: make a Strength test against a difficulty 10 killing outcome (see **Icons**, p. 70).

Environmental Rules

Superheroic adventure doesn't just happen on (and above) the city streets, heroes visit all sorts of exotic and dangerous locales in the pursuit of their calling, and **Icons** Game Masters should be prepared to take their heroes from the bottom of the ocean or the depths of the Earth into the vastness of space and beyond. This section looks at some different environments for Icons adventures and how to handle them in the game.

Aquatic Adventures

Superheroes end up beneath the waves for any number of reasons: sunken lost civilizations, pursuing aquatic creatures, exploring the ocean depths, or perhaps the underwater world is already their home! Whatever the case, if you take the plunge with your **Icons** game and go underwater, there are some things to consider.

Drowning

First and foremost: how are the heroes going to breathe? As detailed under Swimming in the Taking Action! chapter of **Icons**, characters underwater must make an escalating Strength test each page to avoid unconsciousness and drowning: the difficulty increases by +1 per page until the character can take a breath. A failed test means the character becomes unconscious and begins losing Strength, just like a failed test against a killing outcome. Even the strongest heroes can only last so long. Obviously, those with the Aquatic power have no concerns, but the rest need some way to keep breathing.

They may have access to some underwater equipment like SCUBA gear (which stands for Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Aparatus) or miniature "rebreathers" that can stave off the need for Strength tests for a short while (anywhere from 10 to 20 pages). You can provide the heroes with this gear as part of the plot, or they might spend Determination to retcon having it around. It's

a good use of Team Determination, in which case you might allow one point of Determination to equip the entire team.

Similarly, a hero might be able to use Inventing (**Icons**, p. 63) to whip up some underwater breathing gear for the team, from something SCUBA-like to personal life-support fields or even magical spells or amulets of water-breathing!

Movement

By definition, movement underwater requires either swimming or some other means of propulsion. Non-Aquatic characters are limited to close distance movement while swimming, like normal movement for Coordination 2–5. At the GM's option, treat swimming movement like normal movement, but based on the lower of Strength and Coordination, modified by Athletics specialty (if any).

Aquatic characters move at a speed based on their level, as noted for the power. Treat Flight as an equivalent level of Aquatic while underwater—slowed by the greater resistance—provided the power will work in that medium at all. See Powers for some possible adjustments.

Most other movement powers either work unchanged underwater (Dimensional Travel, Teleportation) or don't work at all (Leaping, Swinging). Also note that any level of the Density power gives the character negative bouyancy; while the power is active, the hero literally sinks like a stone!

Conflict

As mentioned in **Icons**, fighting underwater imposes a –1 penalty to all tests due to the greater resistance of the aquatic medium. The Underwater Combat specialty negates this penalty, while the expert and master levels increase the character's combat tests underwater. Aquatic characters also benefit from an increase in Coordination and Awareness while submerged, giving them an added advantage in combat (along with not having to worry about breathing, of course). Underwater targets have less bracing, and can be slammed regardless of comparative Strength and damage levels.

Powers

The underwater environment affects how some powers work.

Powers relying on combustion, like Fire Control or fiery Blasts, do not work underwater. Air Control only works if the character has the Creating effect to generate air. Otherwise, there's very little to control. Water Control, conversely, works much like Air Control, commanding the medium all around the characters, even creating strong currents in place of "winds." Plant Control works on kelp, seaweed, and other underwater plants, but may be limited away from them in open water. Light-based powers tend to be limited due to the way water refracts light. Laser Blasts tend to scatter, as do light-based Blinding attacks. On the other hand, sound carries more easily through water than air, so sonic attacks may affect all targets in a close distance, much like an explosive blast. The same is true for electricity, but the difficulty is such attacks can be difficult to limit to just one target!

As previously mentioned, some movement powers are reduced in effect underwater. Flight and Super-Speed provide, at best, the equivalent speed of the same level of the Aquatic power, due to the denser medium. Some forms of Flight, like wings or rockets, won't work at all due to the lack of air.

Most other powers work normally underwater, so long as they are not dependent on air as a medium or upon something else not found in the aquatic environment. For example, Animal Control limited to avians is of little use, as is Interface, unless the heroes happen to be someplace (like a sea-base or submarine) with underwater electronics.

In situations where a character is a real "fish out of water" in the aquatic realm (so to speak), the GM can treat the problem of powers working poorly or not at all as a temporary challenge, tagging

it and awarding the player Determination. So, for example, when the heroes venture beneath the waves to negotiate with the Lost Kingdom of Atlantis and come under attack, and the flame-controlling hero's powers prove useless, you can award his player some Determination.

The good part about this is players can then turn the added Determination towards stunts, focused effort, or other uses intended to compensate for the challenges of the environment. Perhaps the flame-controlling hero can learn to superheat the water, for example, or turn to other strengths. Encourage clever ideas and innovation from the players, as always.

ASTRAL ADVENTURES

Some heroes, especially psychic and mystic types, venture into an "astral" or "etheral" plane of existence in the course of their adventures, most commonly through the Astral Projection power, although Phasing or Dimensional Travel may also be involved, especially if the hero is bringing friends along for the ride. This section covers how things work on the astral plane, should the heroes go there.

Getting There

One of the key challenges of the astral realm is getting there in the first place. You need the Astral Projection power to send your spirit form into the astral or the Dimensional Travel power to go and take your body along for the ride. Dimensional Travel also offers the potential to take others with you or open a portal between the two realms. At the Game Master's discretion the Phasing power may also interface with the astral plane; it could be where the character's mass goes while physical appearance remains on this plane of existence.

Heroes may also find getting back from the astral plane a challenge. An astral projector could be blocked from returning to his body by a force field, magical ward, or similar countermeasure, or simply by finding the body already occupied by another spirit! Likewise, travelers to the astral realm could find their return blocked by magical or technological means to "harden" the walls between worlds. Returning could become a pyramid test with specific parameters based around overcoming these difficulties (see Pyramid Tests in this book).

Perception

Perceptions in the astral ralm may be strangely distorted. The GM can play with distances (**Icons**, p. 55) with things appearing much closer or further away than they actually are. A specialty in the Occult (or a related psychic discipline) may add to Awareness tests on the astral at the GM's discretion, allowing knowledgable and experienced characters to notice things they might otherwise overlook.

Movement

Movement in the astral plane is as easy and swift as thought, or as slow and difficult as a nightmare, depending on the circumstances. Most of the time, astral beings can move quickly and easily, unhindered by gravity or physical obstacles (through which they pass harmlessly). Certain mystic forces (or foes) can shape the stuff of the astral realm to make things difficult, however, and the GM can place traps and other challenges in the heroes' path.

Conflict

Conflict for heroes who have physically entered the astral is similar to the real world, although affected by local influences on movement, perception, and so forth. The Game Master may also apply a challenge by having a hero's powers disrupted or changed in some way (see Powers, following).

For astral projectors, conflict in the astral realm is entirely a matter of mind and spirit, not body. Use the hero's mental abilities in place of the corresponding physical abilities: Astral Prowess is equal to Intellect, Astral Coordination is equal to Awareness, and Astral Strength is equal to Willpower. A character might be a 90-pound weakling in the physical world, but a powerhouse on the astral plane!

Powers

A mental and mystical realm, the astral plane is most attuned to mental powers and powers like Magic (Wizardry). Physical powers—technological devices, in particular—may not function as expected there. Distortions in otherwise dependable physical qualities like time, distance, and gravity may interfere with the functioning of some powers. This gives Game Masters the opportunity to present power-related challenges to the players (awarding them Determination, as usual) in order to spice-up astral adventures and to present opportunities for the heroes better-suited to working on the astral plane to strut their stuff.

OUTER SPACE ADVENTURES

Plenty of superheroes have adventures in outer space. For some, the cosmic void may be their regular "patrol beat"! Heroes end up in space facing-off against alien invaders or heading off cosmic disaster like a comet or asteroid collision, or a menace that eats entire planets (or stars)! Here are some guidelines if you take your **Icons** game out into the "final frontier".

Survival

The immediate concern in space is survival in the airless void, flooded with stellar radiation. As noted on p. 42 of **Icons**, ignoring all the perils of survival in space requires at least Life Support 4 for immunity to cold, suffocation, radiation, and vacuum. The Immunity power applied to all of those conditions also protects a character. Anyone lacking such protection suffers 1 Stamina damage per page for each one missing (4 damage per page for all 4). Armor does not protect against this damage. Upon reaching 0 Stamina, the character begins losing Strength, just like a failed test against a killing outcome.

Heroes lacking innate resistance to the rigors of outer space may wear protection like a space suit or some other life support gear. You may provide access to this gear as part of the plot of the adventure (if the heroes know they are going into space and have access to such resources) or ask them to spend a point of Team Determination to have space suits or similar equipment on-hand. For a series that ventures into space often, such protection should be assumed as part of the team's equipment.

Movement

Movement in space is complicated by the general lack of gravity; objects in outer space are in freefall. This generally applies a –1 penalty to tests involving agility or movement. The Aerial Combat speciality (**Icons**, p. 24) negates this, much like the Underwater Combat specialty negates the penalty for acting while submerged.

Conflict

Slam outcomes in the microgravity of space result in the slammed target moving continuously in a straight line until impacting an obstacle of some sort. The GM may wish to give a slammed hero the opportunity for a Coordination test to grab onto something before being thrown off into empty space unless there is someone else able to catch them! Targets in microgravity can potentially be slammed regardless of comparative Strength and damage levels.

Powers

The primary issue with powers in space is the lack of an atmospheric medium or gravity. So, for example, Fire Control is largely ineffective without oxygen to feed flames. Likewise Sonic Control—and other powers dependent on sound waves—cannot carry through airless vacuum.

Although objects in space have little or no weight, they do still have mass, which affects powers used to lift or move things. So a hero with Earth Control can still move the same mass of space rock as ordinary earthbound stone, and Telekinesis still affects the same mass whether on Earth or in space.

As with the aquatic environment, the GM can treat the inability to use some powers in space as a temporary challenge, tagging it and awarding the hero's player Determination. The player, in turn, can use that Determination for some creative stunts to get around the limitations of operating in space.

Underground Adventures

There is a lot going on beneath the surface of most superheroic worlds: lost civilizations, vast cave and tunnel complexes inhabited by mole people, dwarves, or magma men, passages to the "center of the Earth" where dinosaurs still roam, and so forth. Here are some guidelines for when your adventures take the heroes beneath the earth.

Survival

Assuming the heroes find sufficient passages and tunnels to take them underground, their primary concerns are having sufficient air to breathe and the potential for collapses and cave-ins. Running out of air results in suffocation similar to drowning (see Aquatic Adventures): escalating Strength tests to avoid unconsciousness and loss of Strength. This only occurs once the heroes are actually out of oxygen, more often, the threat in an underground adventure is being trapped and having to escape before the available air is exhausted (potentially handled as a timed pyramid test, see Pyramid Tests for more).

Underground tunnels and caverns are often unstable, particularly with the kind of force superheroes are known to exert. Most of the materials around them are Strength 6. Any attack which misses its target within range of a nearby surface may trigger a collapse: total the levels of damage striking the surrounding area, subtract the material's Strength, and roll a die, if the result on the die is less than the value, there is a cave-in. If not, nothing happens, but damage to the area continues to accumulate.

Example: *Volcano and some allies have cornered some of Gorn's Molten Men in a cavern and a fight breaks out. Volcano carefully blocks a Molten Man's attack, but Electric Judy dodges out the way and the Molten Man hits the cave wall. He has Strength 8, inflicting 2 points of damage above the wall's Strength 6. The GM rolls a die and gets a 3. That's not less than the 2 total damage, so while the wall cracks a bit, nothing happens. Then Thruster blasts at one of the Molten Men... "Thruster, no!" Volcano calls out, too late. Thruster misses. His level 8 Blast of Tau energy strikes the cave wall for another 2 damage. The GM rolls the die again... and gets a 2. The cavern shakes and collapses.*

A collapse does level 3 damage to all characters in the area

plus an amount equal to the accumulated damage that caused the collapse (or simply 3 plus the roll of one die, if you prefer). Characters are pinned under debris and must have a Strength at least equal to the damage level to pull free. Otherwise they suffer the same damage each page until they reach Stamina 0 and begin losing Strength. Other characters can help a pinned character get free (see Combining Abilities, p. 57 of **Icons**).

Perception

Unless there are light sources in place (artificial lightning, luminescent moss or fungi, glowing crystal deposits, etc.) characters will not be able to see much at all deep underground. All actions requiring vision have a –2 penalty and the GM may call for Coordination or Awareness tests to avoid blundering into obstacles or hazards.

Movement

Movement underground is limited to available tunnels or passages unless characters have powers like Burrowing or Phasing (or can stunt them off of their existing powers). In some situations, the GM may call for tests of Coordination to slip through tight passages or narrow openings, with failure meaning the character gets stuck and must make another test to get free.

Powers

Most powers are unaffected by the underground environment, although some Elemental Control powers—Water and Weather, for example—may be less effective when their user is surrounded by tons of earth and stone. Earth Control, on the other hand, has plenty to work with!

Heroes mainly need to be concerned about the potential of causing collapses with their damaging powers (see Survival, previously) and some other side effects, like flame-based powers burning up the available oxygen in an area. The GM should feel free to consider heroes seriously hindered by the environment facing a temporary challenge and award their players Determination.

SIDEKICKS

Batman and Robin.   Captain America and Bucky. Green Arrow and Speedy. Human Torch and Toro. Saguaro The Man-Cactus and Prickly Pear!

Sidekicks are a staple of Golden and Silver Age comics, and would comfortably suit an **ICONS** campaign set in those eras, or one looking to reflect those styles and sensibilities, yet in a modern setting.

THE HISTORY OF THE SIDEKICK

Sidekicks had been around since well before the comic book, but these were usually adult supporting characters serving as assistance to the main hero. Examples can be found in dime novels, in radio shows and pulp magazines. Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. The Lone Ranger and Tonto. The Shadow and Margo Lane.

The earliest comic sidekicks, specifically teenaged companions to the main hero, were intended by the publishers to be the point of identification for comic book readers, ignoring the fact that most readers were identifying with the heroes already. With the success that DC Comics found in Batman and Robin, soon most publishers had some variation on the adult hero paired with a youthful sidekick.

The trend continued through the 1940s and into the 50s -- when Dr. Frederick Wertham published his scathing "exposé" on the moral ills of the comic book in *Seduction of the Innocent.*

In the book, Wertham cast

a suspicious eye on the relationships presented between adult men and their young sidekicks, presenting them as promoting "deviancy", and comic books in general as contributing to Juvenile Delinquency -- a terrible scourge on the nation. The result of his aspersions was not the elimination of the sidekick, but a shift in content of comics themselves.

The industry, fearing government censorship, elected to self-censor, creating the Comics Code Authority, which enforced a strict code of content. No disrespect for established authority was permitted to be shown. Restrictions were placed on the portrayals of kidnapping, concealed weapons, the use of titles with the words "horror", "terror" or "crime", and depictions of love stories that did not emphasize the "sanctity of marriage."

As a result, the tone of comic books changed in the 1950s to a more juvenile focus -- which, given the reduction in crime and horror comics, led to an expansion of superhero titles, albeit with a campier tone -- and sidekicks (indeed, entire superhero "families") proliferated.

By the mid 1960s, the country had seen an explosion of the "teenage" culture, and media created to capitalize upon it, ranging from rock-and-roll music to movies, and comics publishers were eager to reflect that. Marvel Comics led the way, by breaking the heroic mold of traditional comic books and creating Spider-Man, who was a teenager, still in school. The title told stories of Peter Parker's efforts to balance his life as an American teen with his responsibilities as a masked hero, and it was revolutionary. Other teen heroes followed, notably the Uncanny X-Men, whose stories spoke to the inner fears of every teen: feeling different and alone.

The popularity of Marvel's teen heroes inspired their main rival, DC, to use some of their ready-made teen

heroes as well. Sidekicks were promoted to the lead characters in their own titles, most notably via the Teen Titans.

Sidekicks began to fall out of favor as the 60s gave way to the 70s and 80s. The former sidekicks were now the stars of their own books, and the social changes that America was experiencing led to a relaxing of the Comics Code, allowing for stories which tackled more serious issues. Interestingly, DC comics used the tradition of the sidekick as a method to address one of these new, more socially-aware topics, by having Speedy, the long-time sidekick of the Green Arrow, revealed as a drug addict.

By the modern age of comics, sidekicks had almost completely disappeared, washed away by a combination of the darkening of tone and the deconstruction of heroic archetypes that became popular by that time. Occasionally, however, new characters were introduced, especially by creators looking to revive the hopeful optimistic tone of the Silver Age, while still telling complex stories.

SIDEKICKS IN ICONS

A sidekick in **Icons** is an extension of a player-character, run by the player as support. Rather than a fully-fledged PC in their own right, sidekicks exist entirely as a function of the main hero. When a sidekick has developed to the point where players and GM think that it merits more focus, they can be spun off as stand-alone heroes themselves. Within their role as a sidekick, however, they are usually limited to support.

Players wishing to have sidekicks should create them during the Hero Creation phase of the campaign, although Game Masters may also permit the addition of sidekicks as events occuring in a campaign already underway.

Any player who has chosen to have a sidekick must choose "Sidekick" as an Aspect. Sidekick is a quality, meaning that it can be both tagged (in order to spend Determination) and compelled (in order to be awarded determination). Rules governing the tagging and compelling of the Sidekick Aspect are covered later in this chapter.

If a player wishes to have multiple sidekicks, the Aspect does not need to be taken multiple times. In these rare cases, the single Aspect covers the group of sidekicks that are created as a result. For more information on multiple sidekicks, see later in this chapter.

The player then rolls on the Sidekick Role table, to determine the nature of the sidekick, as well as the method that should be used to create the sidekick.

2D6 Sidekick Role

2–8 Junior Version: The sidekick is a pint-sized version of the hero's gimmick or theme. The sidekick has the same Origin as the hero, and many of the same powers. Using the points-budget allocation method described on page 17 of the **Icons** rulebook, or the **Icons Character Folio** available online from Ad Infinitum Adventures, determine how many points your hero is worth, and build your sidekick from a budget equal to 2/3rds that total, rounding up. **Examples of Junior Versions:** Speedy, Wonder Girl, Kid Flash, Toro, Captain Marvel Jr..

9–10 Reflection: As above, but the sidekick is a reflection of the hero, oppositional in powers (fire and ice, alien and earthly, superpowered and normal) or just in theme (a dark hero having a light-hearted sidekick, for example). **Examples of Reflections:** Robin, Bucky Barnes, Jimmy Olsen.

11-12 Unrelated: The sidekick is rolled as a normal character, unrelated in theme or powers to the hero. **Examples:** Falcon, Arthur the Moth, Kato, Demolition Man.

Once you have the sidekick role determined, character creation procedes as described in the **Icons** core book (pages 9-15).

SIDEKICK CREATION EXAMPLE

Branden has just created his main hero, Saguaro the Man-Cactus (**Icons** core book, pages 15-16), and wants Saguaro to have a sidekick. He gives Saguaro the quality "Sidekick:", ready to fill in the name after he's created the parter of the Sentinel of the Southwest.

Branden rolls on the Sidekick Role table, and comes up with "Junior Version" -- a pint-sized version of the hero's theme. This sidekick will be created via points-allocation, with 2/3rds of the point total of the hero.

Saguaro wasn't created by points-allocation -- he was randomly rolled. But plugging his numbers into the **Icons** Character Folio (a Java-based character creation application available at RPGNow.com), we see that The Mighty Saguaro totals up to 39 points. This means that we have 2/3rds of that total -- 26 points -- to create the sidekick.

As per the points allocation guidelines on page 17 of the **Icons** core book, each level of an ability and each level of a power costs 1 point, as does each level of a specialty.

The important thematic elements of Saguaro are his spines (represented by Aura), his super-strength, and his leaping. So these are the things we'll try to keep in mind with the sidekick.

In keeping with the "junior version of Saguaro" idea, Branden sticks to the general outline of Saguaro, but with lowered totals:

Branden chooses the following abilities:

Prowess: 2 -- below average, representing a minor with no real combat training.

Coordination: 3 -- human average.

Strength: 6 -- while not in the realm of super-human, this is the pinnacle of human

Sidekick vs Team-Up

A sidekick does not have to be a teenager or a kid -- but when a sidekick is another adult hero, what's the difference between a sidekick and a team-up?

In reality? Not much. It could be argued, for example, that The Falcon, who paired with Captain America through a large part of the 1970s, was Cap's sidekick, as he was there as a supporting character in Cap's ongoing monthly comic.

But where would that put Green Arrow, who joined Green Lantern in his title in the same period? Both were long-standing heroes in their own right... Isn't that just a team-up?

As far as **Icons** is concerned, the definition comes down to one of game play. A sidekick is a supporting character run by the player as an extention of their main character. If the supporting character is run by another player? They're not a sidekick. That's a team-up.

Most importantly, a sidekick requires the main hero to have the appropriate Aspect. A player running two heroes doesn't get the benefits of a sidekick unless one of the characters is defined as such. To use another example published in the 1970s: When Iron Fist joined Power Man in the latter's ongoing title, and then partnered from that point forward? Power Man's player would not be able to gain the mechanical benefits of having Iron Fist as a sidekick, unless "Sidekick: Iron Fist" appeared on Power Man's character sheet. Without that, it's a team-up, even if the same player is running both.

Sweet Christmas!

strength, which is still pretty powerful for a teenager!

Intellect: 3 -- human average (and, it should be noted, a bit brighter than Saguaro himself!)

Awareness: 3 -- human average.
Willpower: 3 -- human average.

For specialties, Branden only chooses one,

Athletics, to assist with leaping and such. When it comes to powers, Branden goes with:

Aura 2 (the sidekick has some spines, but not nearly as much as Saguaro), and **Leaping 3** (the sidekick is still a bounder, but not quite at Saguaro's level).

This totals out at 26 points. Branden chooses the name Prickly Pear, another name for the Opuntia cactus which features small hairlike prickles -- so he finds it a suitable name for a juvenile version of the Man-Cactus.

Choosing a set of Aspects for Prickly Pear, Branden comes up with the following:

Qualities

• Catchphrase: "Órale!"

• Connection: The Mighty Saguaro (sidekicks should make sure to take a Connection to the main hero during creation).

• Connection: The SuperNet -- online community of superpowered minors.

Challenges

• Appearance: Weird-looking cactus-kid.

• Personal: Burden of responsibility to his community.

• Personal: A bit of a show-off.

Branden decides that Prickly Pear is Hector Novarro, a teenager who was the subject of an occult experiment by the Gila Master to create an evil version of Saguaro. Saguaro broke the villain's hold over Hector, but the boy had already been transformed into a cactus-man. Feeling responsible for the boy's transformation, Saguaro took it upon himself to train Hector and help him adapt to his new life. Soon, Saguaro and Prickly Pear were leaping throughout the Southwest, fighting crime as the Desert Duo!

SIDEKICKS IN PLAY

Sidekicks are run during an **Icons** game by a player in a supporting role to their main character.   In addition to essentially allowing the player to double their actions every turn (by running two characters, each of whom can concentrate their efforts in a specific direction), this also allows a player to have the benefits of combined efforts on actions, by having the hero and the sidekick focus on the same task.   This is run slightly differently than under the usual **Icons** rules, however.

As described on page 57 of the **Icons** core rulebook, characters may combine abilities for tests -- using the lowest ability level for the test, but getting a +1 bonus from the higher ability (so characters combining on a Strength test with abilities of 4 and 6 would test using the 4, with a +1 bonus).   With a sidekick, however, the higher ability is the one used, **but the +1 bonus for combined effort is still given** (so the test would be done with the 6, with a +1 bonus).   This is designed to reflect the assistance provided by sidekicks, even to heroes with higher ability scores.   This assistance carries over to combat as well...

SIDEKICKS IN COMBAT

In a similar manner as described above, a sidekick can assist in combat, with slightly different rules than those covering combined attacks found on page 67 of the **Icons** core rulebook.

The general rule for combined attacks states that so long as the two different attacks damage levels are within 1 point of each other, the highest damaging attack gets a +1 bonus. With sidekicks, however, **any combined attack receives the +1 bonus, regardless of original damage levels.** This means, for example, that when The Mighty Saguaro and Prickly Pear both punch the same target, the attack will have a damage level of 10 -- 9 for Saguaro's Strength, and +1 for Prickly Pear's, even though his Strength is 3 levels below Saguaro's.

In addition, a sidekick gains a point of Determination any time they are subject to an attack in which they take damage.

SIDEKICKS AND DETERMINATION

A sidekick gains Determination in the same way as any other character, and can spend Determination as normal as well.   As mentioned on the previous page, however, sidekicks also gain a point of Determination if they are subject to an attack in which they take damage -- but that is not the only way in which sidekicks differ from normal Determination usage.

A sidekick's Determination points can be freely spent by either the sidekick or the main hero.

In a way, this is a bit like the sidekick and the hero forming a "team of two" -- with the sidekick's Determination functioning as the Team Determination.

The ability of the main hero to spend Determination from the sidekick is limited by proximity -- expenditure can only occur if the hero and the sidekick are present together within the same scene (although they do not have to be in physical proximity within the scene).

This expenditure of Determination can be brought about by the tagging of any of a hero's Aspects -- including the Sidekick Aspect itself, if such a tagging makes sense (for example: Hangman tags his "Sidekick: Archer" aspect in order to spend Determination to perform a stunt (as per page 80 in the **Icons** core rulebook) during his attempt to rescue Archer from the clutches of Serpent Sphinx, who is holding the Boy Bowman hostage. Hangman's player argues that his effort is motivated by his relationship with Archer, and the GM allows it).

Of course, a GM can also compel the Sidekick Aspect as well, offering the main hero a point of Determination in return for accepting a consequence related to the sidekick -- in the above example, for instance, the GM would have compelled the Aspect to have Serpent Sphinx kidnap Archer in the first place.

As per the standard rules for compelling, a player may refuse, but must spend a Determination point to do so.

GRADUATED SIDEKICKS

At some point, the player may decide that it is time for the sidekick to move on, to become a fully fledged hero in their own right (examples of this from the comics include Dick Grayson leaving behind his Robin identity to become Nightwing). In this case, the main hero's Sidekick Aspect is dropped (becoming a Connection Aspect, if the player wishes), and the GM should give both the main hero and the sidekick a permanent +1 bonus to their starting Determination.

The special rules governing sidekicks no longer apply to these characters, and, at the player's discretion, the sidekick character may change their name, becoming the new "grown up version" of the character.

Super-Vehicles

The Batmobile. The Invisible Jet. The Hell Cycle. The Blackbird. Comics are filled with super-vehicles -- devices which are more than just mere modes of transportation, but possess special qualities and abilities all their own.

As described in **Great Power** (page 136), Vehicles are special movement devices -- treated as a power, with levels. A vehicle has its own abilities (Handling, Speed and Structure), with total abilities no greater than four times the power level (so a hero with a level 6 vehicle has 24 points to spend on abilities).

The core abilties are:

Handling: How responsive the vehicle is to its driver or pilot. Tests for maneuvering the vehicle use the lesser of its Handling or the character's appropriate ability (usually Coordination, modified by specialty).

Speed: How fast the vehicle travels. Some vehicles have different speed levels for different environments, but must have at least one: ground, water, air, or space.

Structure: The vehicle's Material Strength in terms of damage. It takes into account that

vehicles are complex machines with vulnerable moving parts rather than just solid blocks of material. Some vehicles also have armor (Damage Resistance) protecting the vehicle, its passengers, or both.

For creating super-vehicles, you may also add powers to the vehicle, with each level of power costing one point from the available total. For example, a tank (as described in **Great Power**, has Handling 3, Speed 2, Structure 7, Armor 5 and a cannon which does Blast 7. This means that it as 24 points in total abilities, which would require that a hero have Vehicle at level 6.

As always, GMs and players should remember that **Icons** is not a game of accounting--the abilities of a super-vehicle should be painted in broad strokes. It is not neccessary to account for every dial on the dashboard. You don't need to take Interface to represent a car's standard on-board wi-fi, for example -- although if the car possesses a super-computer than allows for other uses of the Interface power, then it is appropriate to have the power listed (and paid for).

In short, only tally those abilities which are of critical importance to the vehicle, and feel free to make allowances for abilities which are common, or which are thematically appropriate (for example, it makes sense that a submarine would allow its user to breathe while using it -- it does not require Life Support to reflect that.). As always, the GM should remain the final arbiter of what is appropriate.

Super-Vehicle Powers

What follows is an alphabetical listing of powers appropriate for vehicular use, along with suggestions for how they might be applied.

Absorption: The vehicle has some sort of reactive armor (absorbing kinetic energy into a Blast extra on the next panel), or perhaps a subsystem that can absorb radiation directly into the power plant (with an Ability Boost extra to Speed).

Affliction: The vehicle releases a stun gas.

Air Control: The vehicle can direct its powerful exhaust.

Alternate Form: The vehicle is able to transform into something other than the materials from which it was constructed. Commonly seen in Japanese comics & cartoons (for example -- *Battle of the Planets'* Phoenix spaceship transforming into an energy form).

Aquatic: The vehicle is capable of operating underwater. Note that this power only applies to vehicles for which this would be an unusual feature. It would not be required for a submarine, for example.

Aura: The vehicle has a defensive system which delivers damage to anyone who touches it.

Binding: The vehicle is armed with a suppression device of some kind, which can entangle targets.

Blast: The vehicle is armed with some sort of weapon capable of delivering damage at range.

Burrowing: The vehicle is capable of tunneling beneath the ground at its normal ground speed.

Corrosion: The vehicle is armed with some sort of weapon that delivers damage by eating away at material strength.

Danger Sense: The vehicle possesses some sort of adaptive response system, aiding the driver in avoiding attacks.

Darkness Control: The vehicle features some sort of "darkness projection" device. (Because SCIENCE!)

Dazzle: The vehicle is armed with a device capable of overwhelming a target's senses (for example: the sound projection cannons used by freighters and cruise ships against pirates today).

Detection: The vehicle possesses specialized scanning equipment calibrated to detect and track a specific form of energy, power, or presence. (Note that mundane detection equipment, like radar, is not covered by this power).

Dimensional Travel: The vehicle has the ability to move at will between dimensions.

Electrical Control: The vehicle has the ability to generate, conduct and project electricity.

Energy Drain: The vehicle is equipped with some sort of nonlethal weapon, which renders targets unconscious.

Fast Attack: The vehicle features an advanced targeting computer which allows more than one attack per panel.

Flight: The vehicle can fly through the air (or, with the appropriate Extra, through space). This power is only appropriate for vehicles that cannot otherwise fly (although it can be taken to represent an aircraft that is also capable of space travel).

Force Control or Force Field: The vehicle has some sort of force field generator.

Gestalt: The vehicle is actually comprised of two or more vehicles which join together (again, a common feature in Japan: Five Robotic Lions who form Voltron, for example.)

Healing: The vehicle features some sort of medical bay capable of restoring lost Stamina and Strength.

Images: The vehicle has a holographic projector.

Interface: The vehicle is capable of accessing information from and interfacing with computers (beyond standard internet access, of course).

Invisibility: The vehicle can become invisible, along with anyone and anything contained within.

Life Support: The vehicle offers life support for those within, beyond what would normally be expected for such a vehicle.

Magnetic Control: The vehicle is equipped with a device that controls and generates magnetic fields.

Phasing: The vehicle (and anyone within) can become insubstantial (perhaps through alteration of its atomic structure allowing it to, for example, drive through solid matter).

Power Nullifaction: The vehicle is armed with a weapon that can completely negate the powers of a target.

Reflection: The vehicle possesses a defensive screen that bounces attacks back onto the attacker.

Regeneration: The vehicle is equipped with a nanotechnology repair system that recovers lost Structure over time.

Resistance (Damage): The vehicle is armored. This power can be Limited, having the protection cover the vehicle, or the passengers, instead of both.

Resistance (Sensory or Detection): The vehicle possesses some form of stealth technology.

Resistance (Mental): The vehicle shields the minds of those within it.

Stunning: The vehicle is armed with a stunning device of some kind.

Super-senses: The vehicle features additional, ehanced or extended sensory abilities. Note that sensory and communications ability that make sense for a vehicle of a certain type (radio, radar and infared for a military jet, for example) do not require the use of this power -- the power should represent unsual or ehanced abiltiy in this area.

Teleport: The vehicle is capable of travelling from one location to another without crossing the distance in between.

Time Travel: An extra of the Time Control power, this represents a vehicle that is capable of travelling through time.

Transformation: The vehicle is capable of transforming from one type of vehicle to another.

Wall-Crawling: A ground vehicle which is capable of moving across vertical and upside-down surfaces (molecular adhesion tires, for example).

Water Control: The vehicle is capable of generating and controlling water -- for example, a submarine which features a tsunami generator.

This is not an exhaustive list. If the GM approves it, a player may design a vehicular use for any power not listed here.

OPTION: INTELLIGENT SUPER-VEHICLES

Players who instead wish to create vehicles that are more than mere conveyances, vehicles which possess their own intelligence (K.I.T.T. from *Knight Rider,* for example) can do so:

Rather than using the vehicle guidelines presented in this section, the vehicle should be created as a character in its own right, and used as a sidekick.

To create such a sidekick-vehicle, use the method for "Junior Method" (2/3rds of the main hero's points total), but with no requirement to echo the hero's powers. Vehicles created in this way have the same abilities as other characters, and their vehicular statistics are those of their vehicle type (as per page 138 in **Great Power**), except where their "heroic" abilities are higher (Prowess for Handling, Coordination for Speed, and Stamina for Structure).

Vehicles created in this way may have their own specialties, powers, and aspects, and adhere to all of the rules governing sidekicks.

HEADQUARTERS & BASES

In the **Icons** core book section on Team Resources (page 20), it suggests that a group headquarters can be paid for with Team Determination, on either an invested or a pay-as-you-go basis. This is how the base is paid for -- but how do you determine the features of that base? How do you create it? What about solo heroes who want to have a headquarters?

For the purposes of these rules, "headquarters" refers to the center of operations of a superhero team, and "base" is the the center of operations of a single hero. During play, of course, feel free to use whichever name you prefer: Base, headquarters, command center, hall, satellite, castle...

SOLO-HERO BASES

Individual heroes who wish to have a headquarters should pay for it at character creation with a point of starting Determination, or, if the GM is using the optional Hero Improvement rules (page 93 of the **Icons** core book), two permanent points of Determination.

Once a hero has paid that price, creating the base follows the same rules as creating a Team Headquarters.

HEADQUARTERS CREATION

For every hero invovled in the creation of the headquarters, you have 20 points to spend on its abilities and powers. Levels of ability and power are purchased on a 1-for-1 basis. In addition, headquarters have their own versions of Aspects -- Qualities cost 1 point, but Challenges give you an additional point to spend.

The abilities which govern headquarters, like those of a vehicle, are different from those that govern characters. Every headquarters or base has three abilities: **Resources, Security, and Structure.**
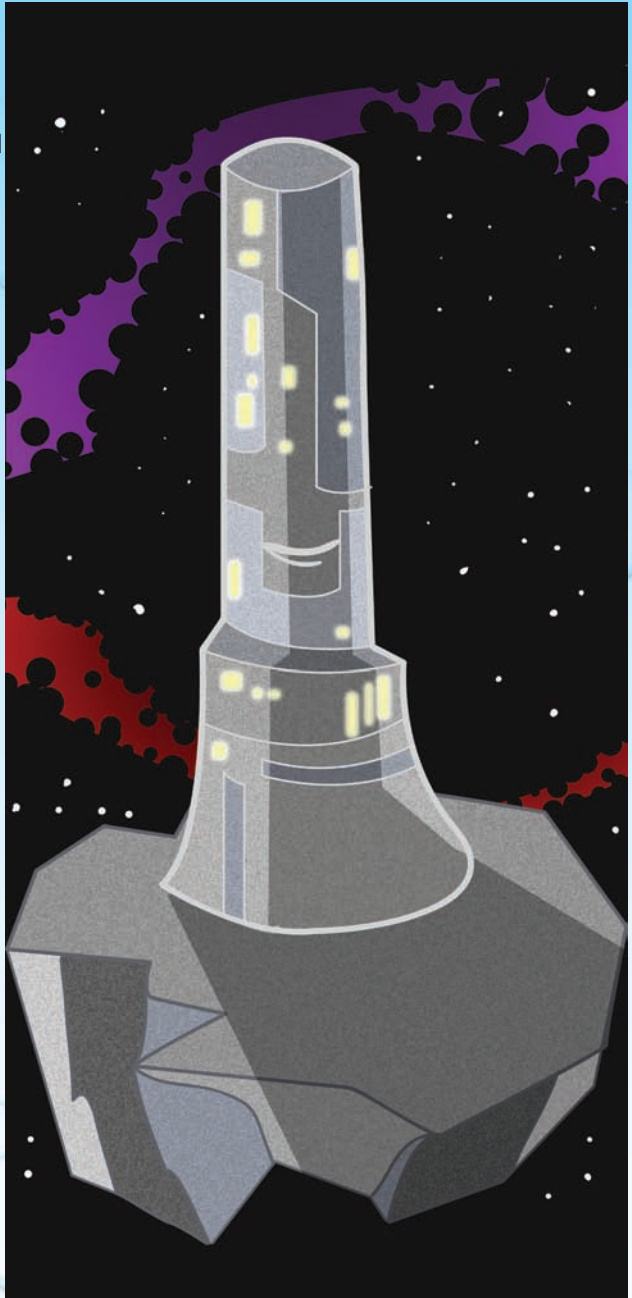
Resources is a measure of the bases' available features to assist the hero or heroes. This ability is used in concert with the base's Aspects -- for example, The Hangman is investigating a crime. He can use the "Deducto, A.I. Supercomputer" quality of The Hangman's Rock to roll using the base's Resources score (or, more likely, to assist him in a combined effort with his own Investigation specialty).

Security rates the headquarters' defenses to infiltration (whether physical, electronic, or sensory), also used in combination with particular Aspects detailing those features. For instance, Miss Tikal's Secret Pyramid, which has "Hidden in Nth Dimensional Space" as a quality, would resist all villainous attempts to locate it with a Security roll.

Structure is a simple rating of the overall material strength of the base itself. Note that the Structure rating is only the material strength, not the overall "Stamina" of the entire headquarters -- exceeding the Structure in combat will certainly damage the base, breach walls, etc., but a villain would have to achieve several such successes (via a success pyramid, as per page 17 of **The Villainomicon**) to destroy it entirely. Such a cataclysmic event would be a major turning point in a hero's story, and should be something planned for by the GM and the players.

Headquarters Powers

As with vehicles, Bases are capable of having powers of their own -- the application of those powers are left to the designing players, with GM approval.

Literally any power can be built into a base, since there are inifinite possibilities for how such places are built, powered, etc. Powers can be devices within the base itself, or a reflection of the very nature of the base. Given that variety, we will not waste your time here with an exhaustive list of power options for headquarters and bases, but will provide examples of some typical powers that might appear, as well as some decidedly atypical ones:

Alteration Ray: The Searchers of the Multiverse's headquarters has within it's extensive laboratories a Micronizer -- a ray projector capable of shrinking the sentinels down so that they may explore sub-atomic universes.

Binding: The Hangman's Rock security system is armed with netprojectors which are set to ensnare any villain foolish enough to try to enter.

Darkness Control: Miss Tikal's Secret Pyramid has been known to plunge intruders into complete and inpenetrable darkness...

Empowerment: The crystalline planet of Aderix, home of the Knights of the Universe, bestows the superpowers of a Knight upon those that the planet itself deems worthy.

Environmental Awareness: Nothing happens within the streets of the city without the monitors at Justice Tower noticing.

Flight: Olympus Central, the headquarters of A.E.G.I.S., is held aloft by retro-engineered UFO technology, and moves where needs dictate.

Force Control: The Citadel, home base of the Sigma Squad is protected by a powerful Force Field generator.

Healing: When operations in the field go awry, A.E.G.I.S. agents know that they can depend on the Hospital Wing of Olympus Central to patch them up.

Nemesis: The "practice room" in the Sigma Squad's Citadel generates effective counters to their powers, forcing them to think on their feet during training.

Postcognition: The Dark Mirror in the upstairs study of Pyewacket Manor allows the members of the Astounding Hex-Men to glimpse images of the past.

Time Control: No matter how much time All-Star spends inside the Bastion of Justice, almost no time at all has passed in the outside world.

Vehicle: The garage in The Hanging Rock is where The Hangmobile waits, until it is needed.

HEADQUARTERS ASPECTS

The qualities and challenges of your headquarters is where you specify all of the things that make it unique. These are the features that are not covered by powers, intended for use with the bases' abilities. They can be tagged by any player.

Qualities, the positive aspects of the headquarters, cost 1 point during creation. Challenges, the negative aspects of the headquarters, provide an additional point during creation.

Example Headquarters Qualities:
Deducto, A.I. Supercomputer

Hidden in Nth-Dimensional Space

"It's the CrisisAlert!"

An Unassuming Tailor Shop

Sentinel Satellite

Trophy Room Filled With Bizarre Artifacts

Biometric Locks

School for Gifted Youngsters

Hidden Levels

Creepy Mansion On The Hill

Built with Alien Technology

Example Headquarters Challenges:

Tourist Attraction

"We're putting the entire city in danger!"

Vulnerable to Magic

"You built this under your OWN HOUSE?"

Attracts Monsters

"What do you mean, we're not insured?"

Nosy Neighbors

Remote Location

Expensive Upkeep

Well-known Layout

Trouble Magnet

EXAMPLE OF HEADQUARTERS CREATION

Branden decides that The Mighty Saguaro needs a base of operations. He is a solo hero (Sidekicks, as an aspect of the main hero, do not count as a second hero for the purposes of base construction), and so has 20 points to spend. He likes the idea of Saguaro being based out of an abandoned government test site in the desert. Here's what he comes up with:

Resources: 4 (Not a lot, but respectable.)

Security: 6 (Top secret location, all that goes with it.)

Structure: 7 (Concrete bunkers underground.)

Power: Gadgets 3 (The labs can be used to built adventure-specific gear as needed.)

Qualities:

Hidden Underground Facility (Not many know where it is)

The Red Phone (Old-fashioned, yes -- but Police & Government know the number to call for help.)

High-tech laboratories (Computer-aided design & manufacture of gadgets.)

Challenges:

Remote Location: Middle of the Desert

Unpleasant Reminders of the Past (From time to time, things connected with the base's past come knocking -- alien invaders, dimensional rifts, foreign spies, etc.)

The Solitude of the Cactus-Man (Being so far from other people can lead to bouts of solemn introspection).

Branden names this base "Area 17", and The Mighty Saguaro has a new home!

THE PHALANX

Jul '11
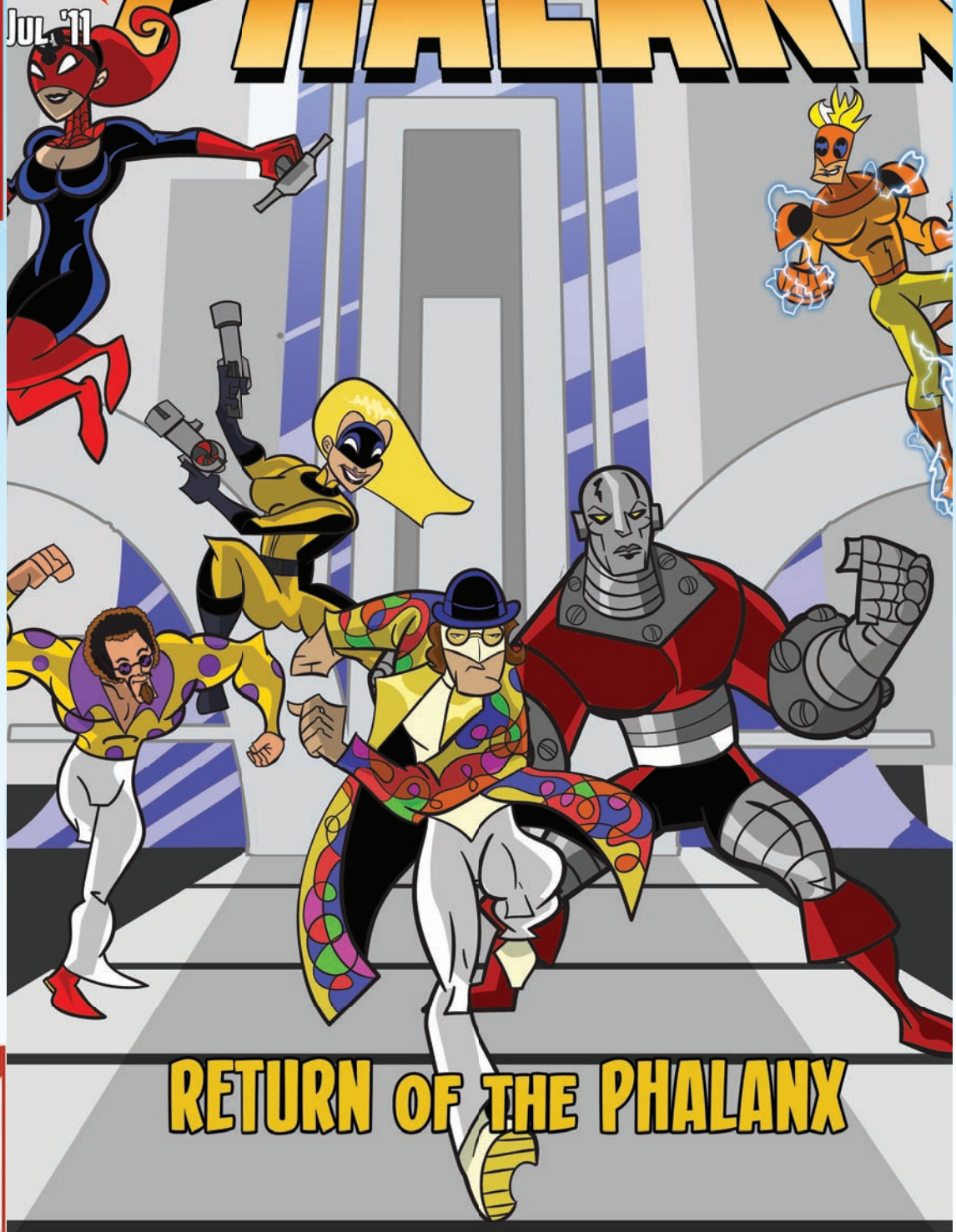
RETURN OF THE PHALANX

Universe-Style Play

As originally designed, **Icons** is perfect for pick-up games -- get some friends together, quickly roll up some characters and run a game for the evening.

However, some people prefer long-term campaign play -- and so what follows herein is a system for long-term campaign play in **Icons**, where you play not just the adventure of a group of superheroes, but the events occurring in the various titles of an entire comic-book <u>universe.</u>

This method takes as its inspiration, the "troupe-style play" used in several other games, first introduced in *Ars Magica,* designed by Jonathan Tweet and Mark Rein-Hagen. In this style of play, the role of the Game Master shifts occasionally from adventure to adventure, with several players trading the role.   In addition, each player creates a set of characters for use in different contexts, rather than a single character as is usual for standard play. The players pick which character they're going to portray based on the circumstances of a particular adventure. Occasionally, there is also a pool of minor characters that are shared between players as needed, or run as NPCs by the GM of a particular adventure when their presence is required.

Dan can't make it to this week's game?   Well, we can't run an adventure of *The Phalanx* without his character Anansia (unless we contrive a reason for her to be gone during that issue)... But Steve's got an idea for an adventure, which will allow me to play instead of GMing -- I'll play Atomic Roach, and Branden will play Saguaro, and we'll do an issue of *The Mighty Saguaro* or *Icons Team-Up* instead!

This style of play allows for a regular game to be run without worrying about what happens when a particular player has to miss a session -- in these cases, you just run another adventure, using a set of characters which does not feature the missing player! It also allows for everyone to have the opportunity to "scratch the itch" of GMing from time to time, which prevents one of main reasons for a campaign ending -- GM burn-out.

Creating Your Universe

The first session in universe-style play is devoted to creating the elements that combine to form your campaign's comic book universe -- Not just the heroes and teams, but the villains, supporting characters and features of the universe.   Here's how it works:

Heroes are divided into three tiers: the Premier tier, the Champion tier, and the Back-up tier. These are not a factor of power -- all heroes, regardless of tier, are created the same way -- this is a factor of their presence within the campaign world.

Premier Tier: These are your A-Listers. The biggest, most popular heroes in your universe. Each is definitely the star of their own title (possibly more than one), and are probably also banded together into the universe's elite super-team as well. Examples from the comics include Superman, Batman and the rest of the Justice League, or Captain America, Iron Man and the rest of the Avengers.

Champion Tier: Not quite at the top level, this includes heroes who may have their own title, which might wax and wane in popularity, or heroes who largely function within a team, rather than on their own. Examples from the comics include The Fantastic Four, Green Lantern, The X-Men (although an argument can be made that they straddle this tier and the one above).

Back-up Tier: The supporting heroes. Members of minor teams, or perhaps occasional minor members of higher-profile teams, characters who have back-up stories in larger titles or anthologies or the occasional limited series of their own. Examples from the comics would include Hawkman, Green Arrow, Moon Knight, Power Man & Iron Fist.

Step One: Hero Creation

All players (including any who might be interested in Game Mastering) should create six characters, broken down as follows:

<div align="center">

1 Premier tier hero

2 Champion tier heroes

3 Back-up tier heroes

</div>

A quick note: six characters will take some time -- and the process doesn't stop here. The best option (and the method which is was built for) is to use random character creation -- a quick series of die rolls, or a click on the **ICONS Character Folio** app (available at DriveThruRPG.com) is much faster than designing each hero from scratch via points-purchase.   However, use the method that your group prefers -- perhaps points-purchase for your Premier hero, with the rest being randomly rolled, or a similar mix.

Considering Teams

To kick off the campaign, at least the setting's elite team should be put together -- obviously this will primarily be comprised of Premier tier heroes, but can also include Champion-tier or even Back-up tier if the players wish (Hey, Blue Beetle was in The Justice League, after all).

The player who will be the primary GM for this team's adventures will not have a character in this team. That player should pick one of their other heroes to be in a second team, which will be Game Mastered by one of the other players.

Consider the team types discussed in the **Icons** core rulebook (pages 83-85) when thinking about team archetypes for this second group, and also give some thought as to themes: Will you have a science-focused team, or an occult-focused one? A group of persecuted outsiders? How about a team whose adventures are galactic in scale, who operate in outer space and only occasionally visit the campaign world?   If you've

got a favorite comics team, consider them for inspiration -- there's nothing wrong with emulating an archetype that you enjoy.

Fill out this team's roster as thematically appropriate (feel free to edit your created heroes to suit the team at this stage).

The remaining heroes will be solo heroes available for guest star appearances or ad-hoc team-ups.

Step Two: Villains!

Starting with the Premier tier, pass your hero to the player on your left. If your hero has the "Enemy" challenge, then the player on your left will create your hero's enemy, using the method described on page 5 of **The Villainomicon.** If your hero does not have the "Enemy" challenge, you can either choose to add that challenge, or the player on your left will just create an "equal-opportunity" villain (one who is not the specific enemy of a particular superhero).

Continue that process for each of the six heroes that you created.

If you wish, any of the pre-generated villains from the **Icons** core rules, **The VIllainomicon,** or any of the published PDF adventures can be slotted in instead of generating a new villain --or they can just be used as extras, in addition to the ones you create. After all, the more the merrier!

By the time this step is completed, each player will have created or designated six villains, giving you plenty to start from.

STEP THREE: FEATURES

The next step goes around the table four times. During each player's turn, they roll on the Feature Category table. On the spot, the player invents a feature within that category, and then picks one of the Premier and Champion heroes created by another player to attach it to. This means that this feature is somehow connected to that hero -- it is up to the hero's player to determine how -- and it can appear in adventures where that hero is present.

A hero can have more than one feature attached, or a hero might not have any -- distribution does not need to be even. Features can appear more than once, with each being a different iteration of that category.

During play, if the Game Master brings in a Feature connected to your hero during an adventure, that hero receives an award of 1 Determination point -- in effect, the Feature becomes a challenge that the GM compels.

Conversely, the player of a hero with an attached Feature can choose to spend a Determination point during play to have that Feature become a factor in the current adventure.

FEATURE CATEGORY TABLE

d66	Result	d66	Result
11	Lost World	41	Monsters
12	Organization (Super-spy)	42	Major Corporation
13	Organization (Criminal)	43	Super-Science
14	Pantheon	44	Ancient Secrets
15	Alien Race	45	Glimpse of the Future
16	Persecution	46	Media & Pop Culture
21	Organization (Occult)	51	Occult Entities
22	Technotopia	52	High Society
23	Organization (Terror)	53	Conspiracy Theory
24	Alternate Species	54	Organization (Law Enforcement)
25	Other Dimensions	55	Organization (High Tech)
26	Armed Forces	56	Super-School
31	Cosmic Entities	61	Unearthly Artifacts
32	Organization (Space)	62	Artificial Intelligence
33	Gov't-sanctioned Supers	63	Family Ties
34	Villainous Nation	64	Mysteries of the Mind
35	Historical Legacy	65	Power Politics
36	Super-prison	66	Other

Defining Features

Features should be thought of along the same lines as Aspects: they can be locations, objects, concepts, supporting characters, or setting elements that relate to the topic. As long as it suits the category, anything goes.

Also note that a feature does not solely relate to the attached hero -- it is a facet of the entire setting. The attached hero has some connection with it -- they've encountered the feature in the past, or they have a relationship with a supporting character who represents that feature, or (if you want a more direct connection), the feature has some bearing on their heroic identity or origin.

Here is a list of the Feature Categories, with brief descriptions and examples for each.

Alien Race: Earth is not the only inhabited world, and visitors from other planets have made their presence known. Moon Men. Martians. Starmazons. The Golkoth Empire (**Icons,** p103), N'Cephalos (**Icons**, p104).

Alternate Species: Humanity is not the only intelligent species that calls the Earth home. Atlanteans. Intelligent Apes. Homo Ulterior. The Molten Men (**Villainomicon,** p 56). The Winged People of Carthoom Island.

Ancient Secrets: Secret societies, or even entire cultures, hidden from the eyes of the modern world. Nova Roma. Ultima Thule. The Sisterhood (**Villainomicon,** p115).

Armed Forces: National forces like the Army and Navy have had to adapt in a world of superpowers, and there are also multi-national and private military organizations (like Megaforce or G.I.Joe) that regularly interact with the world of supers as well.

Artificial Intelligence: Whether self-aware computers or robotic entities like Sigma-9 (**Icons,** p111) and Skeletron (**Villainomicon,** p98), the world has seen the development of machine intelligence.

Conspiracy Theory: Think of a conspiracy theory: the government hiding UFOs; the truth behind the Kennedy Assassination; Orbital Mind-Control Satellites, what-have-you. In your universe, this theory is true (and the hero you attach this to has brushed up against it somehow).

Cosmic Entities: Beings of unimaginable cosmic power, rivaling the gods. Superpowerful aliens like The Eldest (**Villainomicon,** p124). World-devourers. Giant, implacable beings surrounded by crackling Kirby radiation.

Family Ties: A superhero's life is more than just fighting crime. This feature is a location, a supporting character, an object or other setting element that is somehow connected to the attached hero's family.

Glimpse of the Future: This feature, whatever it is, has its origins in the future of this universe. Perhaps there's a supporting character who has travelled back in time, or perhaps an entire location has been time-switched with its own future version.

Gov't-sanctioned Supers: It doesn't take long for governments to get into the superhero business. This feature covers everything from super-soliders to patriotic heroes to official national supergroups.

High Society: Even in a world where a woman can lift a city bus, the true power lies with the rich. This feature deals with the elite of society: the billionaires, the captains of industry, the posh and the royal.

Historical Legacy: The flip side of "A Glimpse of the Future" -- this feature is somehow connected to something that occurred in the universe's history. Perhaps a hero is a new version of a WW2-era hero, or perhaps there are places untouched by the passage of time.

Lost World: Whether it's on an island off the coast of South America, an impassable plateau in Africa, or lying deep within the hollow earth, there is a land hidden from the modern world where dinosaurs roam free and wonders abound.

Major Corporation: From the shadowy villanous conglomerate to the foundation run by the billionaire philanthropist hero, comic book universes are filled with businesses that are players in world events.

Monsters: Vampires. Werewolves. Mummies. Giant, city-destroying kaiju. The world is a far stranger place than you'd think.

Mysteries of the Mind: This feature relates to the psionic nature of the campaign universe, from government laboratories where ESP experiments are conducted, to secret societies of mental masters.

Occult Entities: Ghosts, angels, djinn and demons, ranging from the lowliest devil to rulers like the Yama King (**Villainomicon**, p122).

Organization (Criminal): The mundane world of organized crime is not so mundane when it occurs in a world with superpowers. This feature, like the other "Organization" features that follow, says that there is at least one such group in your campaign universe.

Organization (High Tech): Government or private agencies whose purview is SCIENCE! (Yes, in all-caps, with an exclaimation point.)

Organization (Law Enforcement): In a world of superpowers, the criminal justice system defends society via two separate yet equally important groups: the regular police, who investigate crime; and the special operations groups, who handle super-powered offenders. This is their feature.

Organization (Occult): From dark cults of devil-worshippers to agencies devoted to fighting the forces of supernatural evil, this feature covers groups that deal with sorcery and the supernatural.

Organization (Space): Is your universe protected by a galaxy-spanning corps of superpowered defenders, or has Earth cobbled together a stalwart defense against invaders from beyond the stars?

Organization (Super-spy): It's like real-world espionage. Except with more gadgets. And everybody wears futuristic uniforms. And they're really into agency names with initials that spell something cool.

Organization (Terror): The difference between a criminal organization and a terror organization is that criminals are mostly motivated by making money, and terrorists are motivated by the violent overthrow of societies and governments.

Other Dimensions: Your universe is actually a multiverse, and Earth has had some form of contact with one or more of these other dimensions. The alternate earth where Rex Mundi (**Icons,** p108) came from is an example.

Pantheon: One or more of the mythological pantheons worship by Earth cultures is, in fact, real. They might be other-dimensional superbeings, or a hidden society of high-tech aliens, but they're real.

Persecution: Even in comic-book universes, persecution rears its ugly head, whether it's a prejudice against a particular form of origin (mutants, for example), or merely a smear campaign against a friendly neighborhood hero being waged by a zealous newspaperman who doesn't trust him.

Power Politics: When you save the world, you're eventually going to end up dealing with the powers-that-be. This feature involves the government, whether local, national or global.

Super-prison: Sure, you might be able to defeat a supervillain who is able to punch through walls and fire blasts of protonic energy from his eyeballs, but where are you

going to find a jail that will hold him?

Super-School: The next generation of heroes must be taught. This feature covers everything from secret schools for "gifted" students, to government-run institutions that train young superhumans in the use of their powers. In some campaign universes, it might even cover boarding schools where young wizards learn to harness their powers.

Super-Science: A world that has had alien invasions, super-genius mad science, and encounters with time travel is going to pick up a few items that aren't as common in our world. Has super-science changed the life of everyday people? Is it kept in a warehouse guarded by "top men?"

Technotopia: There is a city or nation on Earth that stands head and shoulders above the rest of the world technologically-speaking, yet has not used this advantage to exert political influence. Whether a super-science-fueled African kingdom, or a high-tech shangri-la in the Himilayas, this location is a factor in your campaign world.

Unearthly Artifacts: Occasionally, Something From Somewhere Else finds its way to Earth, and becomes an object of obsession and power. Fought over for centuries, or used to form the basis of a society or religion. Examples would include the The Mask and Cowl of Shigg, which led August Pickman to become Dirge (**Villainomicon,** p44).

Villainous Nation: It could be a country that's just your run-of-the-mill sinister action-movie bad guys, or it could be a nation that is actively ruled by a supervillain. In either case, not the sort of place you'd want to visit.

Step Four: Finishing Up

At the end of this process, you should have:

- **6 heroes per player**
- **6 villains per player**
- **4 campaign features per player**

That should be more than enough to get started on your **Icons** Universe!

Playing a Universe-Style Campaign

In a universe-style campaign, you and your friends are essentially creating the output of a comic book publisher. Your adventures are issues of the titles in your comic-book universe. The main title that is followed is the adventures of the elite team, but on those occasions when individual players can't make it to game night, or when the GM of the elite team's adventures wants a break, or in any other situation where your players just feel like it -- another player steps in as GM, players pick alternate characters, and you tell the story of an "issue" of another "title."

That title might be the adventures of another super-team, or a team-up book featuring random assortments of heroes within the setting, or maybe even the solo book of one of the Premier-tier heroes, featuring a few "guest star" appearances in that issue.

Every player has access to a number of other characters that they can play at a moment's notice -- and in fact, you might even consider having Back-up tier characters be a community pool, playable by anyone. New characters can be brought in, old characters retired, villains can become heroes... all of the same things that happen in a published comic book universe can happen over the course of your campaign.

You should keep a log of the titles that your campaign "publishes", with notes on what occurred in each issue. It can be fun to look back over your output and see how your universe has come together.

CAMPAIGN SET-UP ADVICE

So you want to play an **Icons** campaign? Great! There's a heck of a lot of fun to be had by leaping into the world of the comics. But a word of warning - dive in too fast, and it might go a little bit wrong. The battlefields of roleplaying are littered with the sad remnants of superhero campaigns that failed.

Superhero campaigns carry a particular set of problems with them, and most of those problems go back to the source material. Unlike many other types of games, superhero comics are incredibly varied. Different people can share the same enthusiasm for supers but have vastly different interests and expectations. Unless these differences can be managed, it's likely they'll cause some problems somewhere along the line.

The very first thing you want to do, if you're thinking of running an extended campaign using **Icons**, is sit down with the entire group and have a big chat about the type of supers game it's going to be. This should cover a bunch of different things. Use the following talking points to get yourselves going:

Initial Inspiration

Many games start because the Game Master or one of the players has an idea. Is that the case here? What are the ramifications of that idea? Is everyone happy to run with the idea? Is the idea open to modification before play starts if other people have interesting ideas? Is there enough freedom in the idea that everyone else won't feel they're just supporting characters in someone else's story?

What comics (or movies or books or TV shows) might this game draw on for inspiration? What is it about the inspirational material that is worth following?

Tone

Icons is, in presentation, bright and fairly light-hearted – like the Silver Age comics or the modern animated series which took them as inspiration. Your campaign, however, does not necessarily need to be locked into that tone.   If your group prefers a more Iron Age feel, dark and angry, with the real possibility of death for all the characters, that can be an option for you as well... or perhaps something in between those two poles?

Will right and wrong be clearly distinct, or will morality be drawn in numerous shades of grey? How heroic will the characters be? What will be the main motivations of the characters?

What kind of stories will the game lend itself to telling? What kind of adventures will the characters have?

Setting

Will the setting predominantly feature low-level powers, or will mountain-smashing heroes and villains be fairly common?

Will the characters be part of the first wave of supers in the settings history, or is there a long tradition of superheroics before them?

Will the game be set in the present day, the future, the past, or on some alternate earth?

Will the game be set in a major American city (the traditional stomping ground of superheroes in the comics) or somewhere else entirely?

Character Structure

Will the characters be part of an organized group or team, or will they be independent characters whose lives keep crossing over?

If part of a group or team, what is the nature of that group? Is it a formal employment situation, for example for a government agency or a private interest? Is it a heroic group with a long tradition of world-saving? Is it a new group of outsiders, banded together to help each other get along in a world that fears them?

If not part of an organized group, how will interaction between the characters be justified? Will the characters have intertwined social and romantic ties? Will the game largely follow different storylines, with players taking turns to sit waiting for their moment in the spotlight?

How will character rivalry be handled? Heroes in comics often disagree and occasionally fight - but in comics, if a dispute gets serious then a character can be easily written out for an issue or a year or given a whole new series with different characters. These

possible outcomes aren't feasible in an RPG. Will players and GM brainstorm ways to resolve disputes so the characters can all stay together in the game? Will a player be encouraged to create a new character, should their first abandon the group after a heated argument?

Play Issues

Will the tone decided above be hard-and-fast for every session, or will some sessions explore a different feel entirely?

How much will the direction of the game be determined by the GM, and how much by the players? Can players introduce their own subplots? Can they introduce any kind of subplot, or just subplots related to their complications or their personal life? Can they introduce subplots for the other players?

Will the game be potentially ongoing forever, as long as players are interested? Or will the game be a limited series, with an in-built storyline finale?

Pulling it Together

If you've talked through all of the above, and everyone in the group is in agreement about the answers to the questions, then you're more than ready to roll. Congratulations - you've already done an enormous amount to ensure your game will survive! Now you can start getting into the really fun part - coming up with characters.

If you are using the traditional **Icons** method, your hero's powers and abilities are going to be randomly determined, but there are still conceptual issues which should be considered when putting together a campaign, even with random character creation.

Power Niche

In supers games, characters tend to be remarkably powerful, matched only by the might of the villains they will face. A good way to ensure that everyone in the game has plenty of opportunity to contribute and feel valuable, each character should exploit a different niche. Like the classes Fighter, Wizard and Rogue, each of the supers should bring something new to the table.

At its most basic, this means that character powers shouldn't overlap within the same team (and preferably, not at all, among any of your campaign's heroes). Your team doesn't need two gigantic super-strong hand-to-hand fighters. Not only are you limiting the ways your group will be able to solve problems during the game, you are setting up a situation where two players compete for the same spotlight moments.

Framing things positively, niche protection means that each character should have a special area in which they excel, and which is shared by no other characters. If each character has a clear area of expertise, then everyone will have more fun, and it will be much easier for the GM to deliver entertaining encounters that engage all of you.

Of course, this need for difference doesn't need to go too far - there is certainly room in most groups for two super-strong characters who are good in a fight. Just make sure that there is enough difference between the two characters to ensure they won't be constantly stepping on each others' toes, and that each of them has a special area in which they alone excel.

If a randomly-created hero has powers that overlap too much with another, the players should be given the option of picking alternate powers (perhaps within the same power category), rather than re-rolling a new hero. Keep in mind, though, that some powers are broadly-defined enough that the same power can lead to very different heroes – for example: the identical rolls of a super-strong character with a damaging aura led to the creation of Saguaro the Man-Cactus and Volcano, exiled prince of the Magma Men!

Personal Niche

Characters in superheroic games tend to be defined in terms of their powers, and rightly so - these are big, dramatic pieces of color which clearly set the character apart. However, heroes should also have personal concerns and personal conflicts. Since the 1960s, these aspects of a supers character are nearly as important as the powers. Unless you decided to play in a classic Golden Age-style game, your characters' personal lives are going to drive a plenty of the game's events and deliver a lot of its drama.

You don't need to figure out a particular subplot for your character, although if you do come up with one so much the better. All that's really needed is a general idea of the kinds of issues the character will be dealing with due to their personal situation. A hero's Challenges are always a good source of this kind of conflict, but it far from the only one.

In a group situation, just as it's important to ensure character powers don't overlap too much, you should ensure your character personal situations cover different ground. The most important reason for this is the most simple: it's more interesting that way.

If every character has a distinctly different set of personal concerns, then the game as a whole will be rich with subplot and drama. Both Game Master and players have more to work with in creating new plotlines and plot twists, and in finding new ways for characters to interact.

If character situations overlap - if, for example, two characters have marriages breaking down because they spend so much time fighting crime - then the game will have a continual sense of deja vu as the same issues are addressed over and over again.

Sometimes, however, a fairly small difference can have a big effect. In the above example, if one character's husband was aware he was married to a superhero, while the other character's spouse was none the wiser, the same basic issue (marriage under strain) could play out in quite different directions. The two similar-yet-different stories could even enhance each other through their contrasts - if one marriage improves while the other deteriorates, for example.

Even though small differences can sometimes be enough, it's a good idea not to go with similar ideas unless you're really taken with them. It's better all around if everyone's personal situation is very different.

Introducing Characters

You have developed a bunch of great supers characters and worked out their nemeses. Your group discussions have established the tone of the campaign and the way you expect it to play. Now the preparations are over - it's time to sit down for the first session.

The first question you need to answer is, will the first session present the origins of the characters? You and the group should discuss this together. Sometimes the answer will clearly be no - for example, if you have decided to start play as a group who have been working together for some time. Other times, starting with character origins will be naturally obvious - for example, if your group has chosen a backstory where they are all experimental subjects, so a natural first story will be escaping from the laboratory.

In general, group origins are suited to playing in the first session, whereas origins that are different for each character are not so much fun for the group. Everyone wants to get into the game, not sit through four other player's solo sequences.

A second, related question is whether the first session will present the origin of the team. Again, sometimes the answer will be obvious, and sometimes not. Playing through the origin of a team can sometimes create amazing character-based stories for the future, but it is by no means necessary - many team comics begin with the group already assembled and neck-deep in whatever that month's crisis might be.

In any case, decide this as a group before planning out the session.

First Appearance

A character's first moment on stage should be a doozy. As a Game Master, your ideal character introduction will be a moment that is so awesomely cool that everyone around the table wants to find out much more about this character. If you get a whole bunch of such awesomely cool intro moments, you will have no trouble keeping players coming back week after week.

One way of making this more likely is getting players to help you. Advise them beforehand the general kind of scene you will throw at them in scene one. ("I want to start with a big bank heist that you guys can foil.") Tell them they will want to make their character's first appearance an absolute knock-out. Give them some time to think it through. Make sure the opening scene gives them plenty of scope to show off their powers, and plenty of activities to engage in so they're not competing with each other to do the same task.

Then, when you begin, you can simply describe the scene in dramatic detail, and hand over to the players to describe their characters in similar detail. For this first scene, give the players and their characters every benefit of the doubt. Go for the awesome and memorable moment and your whole game will benefit. It's a serious investment in the future!

Right - now the session's underway! The characters are introduced and the story is about to get rolling. So what happens now? What else should happen in that first session?

First Session: Content & Staging

In your preparation for the first session, you should start off by thinking of the core question. Answering this question will give you your first session's content. The core question is this: why are the players, and you as Game Master, going to keep coming back each session?

The core question relates to other concerns: what are you all hoping to get out of the game? What is the game about? What kind of stories do the characters demand? You should have covered all of this in your prior discussions about what kind of game this is going to be, what tone it will have, and so forth.

When you have your answer: do that thing. Work out a big picture of what the game is meant to be about, then make the first session a perfect window into the big picture.

Your first session is a chance to state the mission of the whole game. Don't try and make things too complicated, don't try and second-guess the basic structure, don't try and riff off expectations in an elaborate way. The first time out, go for broke on the archetypal experience. Answer that core question. You can get more complicated later on - for now, you want an experience that meets everyone's hopes for the game.

Self-Contained Story?

A key decision you have to make as Game Master is whether this first episode should be self-contained or should feed into a grander plan somehow. There are good points to consider on both sides of that issue.

A self-contained episode gives everyone some wriggle room for the future. This is an important thing, because in any ongoing story, things change. The proper shape of a game often only emerges some three or four sessions in, and when that happens, some elements of the first session might seem odd - even cringeworthy or inexplicable. (*Did Mr. Martian really say that? Why on earth, given what we now know! Did Testament Lass really take that course of action? How unusual and out of character for her! So our master villain was trying to steal the Forever Diamond? Well... I'm sure she had her reasons, whatever they might have been....*) If the first episode is self-contained, then it is easy to let its early inconsistencies slide from view later on, for the benefit of the whole playing experience.

An episode that is not self-contained, which has ties with what comes later, gives a sense of importance right from the start and hooks the players immediately into a larger tale. As subsequent events add increasing layers of meaning to the initial experience of the characters, the first episode becomes a key moment, frequently referenced, where the great plot arc all began... This is very useful to get enthusiasm burning, but must be balanced against the idea that later plot developments will make episode 1 seem strange and ungainly, and also that larger tales often mean mysteries, which means on some level that characters will fail their first time out - they can't uncover the entire mystery and defeat the ultimate bad guy, because that would end the entire plot before it even starts.

A third option is to make the first session a self-contained story, but include a sub-plot which hints at a larger tale – similar to how a TV series can have episodes with stand-alone "A" plots, and "B" plots which leave breadcrumbs throughout the season leading to the a big season finale which (hopefully) ties them all together.

This is more difficult to achieve in an interactive experience like a tabletop RPG (for example, you won't know if players decide to ferociously follow up a lead, dragging

them away from the main plot in favor of the sub-plot), but is worth trying if you're prepared with ways to keep the sub-plot "sub".

Feature the Master Archvillain?

On page 95 of the **Icons** core book, you're directed to create a Master Villain for your group, who represents a contrast to the entire team. This archvillain may be an obvious main bad guy for this first issue. So, should you introduce the Master Villain?

Maybe. If the villain is intimately tied with the group's origin (he was mutated by the same cosmic shower, perhaps), and you're playing through the origin, then by default you need that bad guy in the game.

However, if you have the villain in there then you are closing off your options. You're forcing a choice of negative outcomes - either the heroes face a bad guy and lose in their first ever outing (negative) or the heroes defeat your supposed Master Villain first time out (negative).

Also, if you look at supers comics (as opposed to movies), you'll find that it's rare for a group's archvillain to be introduced in their first issue. Unless you have a compelling reason to put the archvillain in the first session, then, I say leave your debut session archvillain-free.

Spotlight Time For All

Find a way to give every character a chance to show off their shtick. Every hero should have their own niche in the group - strong guy, fast guy, weapons guy, and so on. Prepare some situations where only one character can step up - showcase their niche. Have a desperate race across a city to defuse a ticking bomb - superspeed guy has that one covered. Have a bridge collapsing on a bunch of kids - superstrong guy can hold it up. And so forth.

If you hit the three-quarter mark of your session and someone hasn't had a chance to demonstrate their ability, fix that. Contrive some circumstance to let them do it. It's an investment that pays dividends, because it gives characters a chance to come to life in the game, and that's the best way to get players who want to come back.

Start Easy, Get Difficult

You want the players to love playing the characters, and a good way to do that is to play into the power fantasy side of things. One of the key elements of a supers character is the super power they have, so give them a chance to revel in the coolness of their superpower. Let them face down bad guys they can stomp, give them a crowd to impress, give them a chance to get the feel of being superheroic.

Once you've let them swoop around kicking butt and taking names for a while, you need to show the other side of the coin - they are not all-powerful. Throw in a situation or a bad guy who is no pushover. A rough battle for victory is needed - the other side of these characters is that they're not just powers, they're also resourceful individuals who can dig deep. Let them.

Early Issues: First Story Arc

Your **Icons** campaign is underway! If it all went according to plan, then you've just run one heck of a first session! You have a bunch of players eager to get to the second session, and you're looking forward to it as well. So, with the first session out of the way, it's time to think about what comes after...

Do The Introduction Again

Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer, Firefly,* and writer-director of the biggest superhero movie to date, *The Avengers,* suggests that the first few episodes of a new TV series should serve as mini-pilots. Every one of those first episodes should reintroduce the cast and the situation, and demonstrate with an exemplar plotline why this is a good TV show to watch every week.

The assumptions of an RPG are very different to those of a TV series. Most importantly, a TV series has to allow for people coming in who aren't familiar with prior episodes - this shouldn't be a problem with your game. However, Whedon's advice is more applicable than it first might appear. The audience of your RPG game is, in fact, you. You, the players and Game Master, are the ones who are getting to enjoy the ups and downs of your story first-hand.

There are definite benefits for treating each of the first few issues as an opportunity to do "first episode" bit. It gives everyone a very thorough grounding in what the series is fundamentally about, the core question of the series. It emphasizes very clearly the mission for the whole game. It gives everyone in the game a chance to find their way solidly into their characters, so they have the basics down when you start throwing wild cards at them in session four.

So keep that advice in mind as you prep for episodes after the first. Stick with the same broad questions you answered for the first week, but now blessed with the direct feedback of actual play you'll be better placed to see what works and what doesn't, how the group fits together and where its weak links are, and so forth.

Also keep in mind that the first few villains you introduce are, by longstanding tradition, overwhelmingly likely to become recurring foes. This is a good place to use individual heroes challenge-defined Enemies, and to try out your rogue's gallery for those first few issues to make sure you don't get stuck with any clunkers.

Ask Some Questions

In order to do a fantastic job as Game Master, you need to understand your audience. The first few sessions can be used to help you find out who's who and what's what in your group. (Is there something in a character's personality that seems odd? Force that issue in play and see what goes on in response. How about that poorly-realized family group in the character's background notes? Drag them front and center and pay attention to what goes down.)

The more you force players to respond to these questions, the better you will understand who you are dealing with around a table.

Intuitive Continuity

Most ongoing games rely, at least to some extent, on mystery and surprise in the unfolding plot. In the first story arc, you want to start setting things up for what is to come.

It is highly recommended at this point in a new game to drop in some generic clues or events which as yet have no meaning. Describe a cat-faced man who came to a window then disappeared, and you've given yourself a bit of plot power that you can take advantage of in future. An event may have no obvious cause or justification, and a clue may have no meaning, but the tools you set up by 'activating' elements of the setting in an earlier scene can all be justified and explained later on.

This is a method known as "Intuitive Continuity" – based on improvisation of jazz. You've played a couple of musical licks – the clues and events you've presented, and now your players will start theorizing and taking action based on their perceived meaning for these clues and events. These are their contributions to the music. You can simply sit back and take notes of some of the better theories, and improvise based on their inventions. Remember, nothing is "real" until you present it to the players – so eventually, when you reveal the pay-off to those earlier clues, players will be pleased that they "figured it out" – when they actually helped to create the resolution!

First Story Arc

A story arc is a series of sessions with a common overlaying subject, linked closely by both regular plot and by the interrelationships between the various characters. When you start dropping hints and establishing continuity, all while addressing the core question, you have participated in a story arc. This is a good thing.

When kicking off a first story arc, follow this storyline to its conclusion, whatever it may be. Be open to unusual solutions and unexpected developments. And pay attention to your players!

Why Campaigns Die, and How You Can Stop It

Sometimes, campaigns die. Despite the best will in the world, they sputter and collapse, and you're left with no game. But it doesn't have to be this way! Here, we'll look at some of the reasons why supers games can run into trouble, and discuss ways to avoid these pitfalls.

The Two Most Important Things To Remember

First: remember that games rarely collapse due to just one thing. Usually, it's because several things go wrong at the same time.

Second: remember that you and your friends are meeting to game in order to have fun. Talk to each other. If something isn't right, and the fun isn't working like you hope, be honest about it. Talk about the game frequently, especially when it's good - if you are all in the habit of trusting each other to talk about the game honestly, when a problem comes up you'll be able to speak up about it much more easily. And, seriously, talking about this stuff is far more than half the battle.

Problem: Human Issues

Many campaigns collapse due to human issues. The GM gets a job in a different city and no-one else wants to take on the role. A personal relationship between two players goes sour and that infects the game. Some of the players just can't take the supers genre seriously, despite trying, and end up making fun and doing goofy things.

Role playing games are social activities, and are victim to the complications that emerge from social interaction and all the complexities of human behavior. There isn't any magic salve to fix this one - it's a part of being human, not a part of the game, and the best you can do is pick good people to game with and promote an atmosphere of open discussion. If you keep talking about what's going on, you have the best tool there is to manage these difficulties.

Likewise, human beings have other things happening in their lives besides the game. Sometimes those other things will interfere with the setup for your gaming fun, but there's no way to fix this one either. You manage with the people you get. (Although it's worth mentioning that gaming-via-webcam is now quite easy to set up and works quite well.)

Two classes of human issues deserve special mention.

Firstly, conflicting expectations have undercut countless supers campaigns over the years. The supers genre is big and woolly, with lots of different authentic interpretations. The early portions of this section featured advice to help you negotiate this thorny problem, so if everything's gone as it should, this one shouldn't come up for you too often.

Secondly, another real-world problem is scheduling. Sometimes, people just can't make games they want to get to - they are called away to health emergencies, family commitments, work trips, and so on. This is an eternal problem in a world of busy modern lives. However, if you're using the Universe-style play described here, this will have given you methods to handle player absences, by simply having different spotlight heroes for this session.

Problem: Reactive Characters

The traditional supers story is set up in a very reactive format. There's a superhero who is a protector of the weak; a villain threatens people; the superhero leaps into action to deal with the threat. When the threat is resolved, the superhero resumes sitting back and twiddling her thumbs.

In supers gaming, this can be problematic. It's easy for Game Masters to rely on a 'bad guy of the week' format, wheeling out a new villainous plot to foil each session, but unless the GM is particularly creative (or the players are very invested in a Golden Age style) this will eventually wane in interest. Each game will be more or less a repetition of the previous game, although the names might change and the manner of victory might be different.

The more successful supers campaigns take two routes. First, they turn the expectations on their heads and make their characters proactive instead of reactive. The characters have an agenda of their own, and the game is spent following them as they push that agenda and meet whatever resistance there is. This agenda could be anything from search for something, to an attempt to reconfigure the social structure of the entire world.

Second, they place focus more heavily on the drama of the characters' personal lives. In the complexities and mysteries of relationships and hidden pasts and so forth, the characters will be thoroughly engaged and able to push the story as they see fit. The villainous plots that dominate the foreground become a colorful frame for the real stuff of the story, the character drama. In this format, the superheroics can be entirely reactive because the non-superhero life is much richer and more demanding of character action.

If you feel your game is falling into a rut of reactivity, try orienting more towards one of these routes, and see if that solves your problem.

THE COMPLETE ICONS INDEX

The following pages contain the complete index to all of the **Icons** books.   The books, and the abbreviations which mark them, are:

(I) Icons Core Rulebook

(V) The Villainomicon

(G) Great Power

(T) Icons Team-Up

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SECOND EDITION
FALL 2013