

Basic battle tactics for your super heroes

# “It’s clobberin’ time!”

by Dale A. Donovan

When my gaming group started playing the MARVEL SUPER HEROES™ game back in high school, we were all still gaming rookies. As my game mastering and the players’ skills improved over the next several months, I wanted to introduce a sense of strategy and tactics into the group’s battles. I tried to have my villains use intelligent tactics whenever appropriate in an effort to show the heroes the benefits that having a sound battle plan can produce. And, after their heroes got their heads handed to them once or twice, the players caught on.

This article will help you develop an understanding of some basic tactics that you can use to help your heroes win more of their battles against the forces of evil and villainy everywhere. Heroes are sorted into various categories with titles borrowed mostly from the military, with each having certain offensive and defensive strengths. Although I’ll be using MARVEL SUPER HEROES characters and game terms as examples, the categories describe heroes in general, and the tactics should apply equally well to any superhero RPG.

## Combat categories

**Infantry:** This category of heroes is made up of ground-based (no flying, gliding, etc.) heroes who have few or no true super powers and whose main tactic is to close with the enemy and engage in melee. In the MARVEL UNIVERSE™, this category is represented by the likes of Captain America, Black Knight, Mockingbird, Black Panther, Wolverine, and Daredevil. Their styles and weapons are irrelevant, as all of these heroes do the majority of their fighting in close quarters with the enemy. Other powers or abilities that heroic infantry might possess are: martial arts, weap-



ons, or acrobatic skills; injury-resistant or enhanced senses; or the ability to make multiple attacks per combat round.

**Offensive tactics:** Like its military name-sake, heroic infantry is the best force around at taking and holding ground. When attacking foes, infantry's success or failure often determines the ultimate success or failure of the combat. To insure success, infantry needs support from other types of heroes and should develop some alternatives to the all-too-common frontal assault. Attacking your foes from their flanks or rear is a great way to confuse and distract them. Forcing your foes to react to two or more groups of heroes, coming from different directions, often causes those foes to split up their own forces in order to deal with the threats. Just be aware that dividing your forces for a flanking attempt will also weaken your group as a whole, especially if you are discovered before you are ready to attack. If you doubt that heroic infantry can do much damage in a flanking maneuver, consider what would happen if the Daredevil, Captain America, and Wolverine attacked your heroes from behind.

**Defensive tactics:** Since infantry seldom has true powers, it often cannot withstand an all-out attack by super-powered foes. It is often best, when under this kind of attack, for the infantry to find cover and wait for the other heroes to give it an opening to turn the tide. If no such help is available, the infantry should stay together and make the enemy come to it. Prepare an ambush or some confining trap. Play "cat and mouse" with the foe, and use teamwork to pick off enemies one at a time. These are tactics that Wolverine has used quite successfully

many times. The Dodging and Evading tactics from the MARVEL SUPER HEROES Advanced Set *Player's Book* can also be effective defensive tactics.

**Speedsters:** In super-hero games, this term refers to characters with super speed or other heightened ground-movement powers. In the MARVEL UNIVERSE, some notable speedsters are Quicksilver, Makkari, Super Sabre, and the Whizzer. Any hero qualifies who possesses a power that allows him to cover larger-than-normal ground distances in a round (such as lightning speed or leaping) or allows him to make multiple attacks per round. Note that not all GMs allow speedster characters to make multiple attacks merely because they possess super speed; they must also possess an "extra attacks" power. Characters like this may also have a high agility, endurance, or an injury-resistance power (body armor, etc.). The most common tactic used by these heroes is to simply close with the enemy and enter melee.

**Offensive tactics:** A hero of this type often does have multiple attacks, and this can be used to even the odds if the heroes are outnumbered. This is achieved by distributing the hero's multiple attacks among several targets within the hero's movement range. This gets more enemies involved in melee, preventing the other heroes from being overwhelmed by sheer numbers. A tactic for these heroes who do not possess multiple attacks, but who do possess a high endurance or some form of body armor, is the charge. High speed

means a lot of momentum and a lot of damage to anyone who absorbs that momentum with his body. You can also use these characters to foil enemies' plans by getting behind their lines, committing sabotage, etc. How can the evil scientist fire his atomic mutagen splurge-gun at your heroes if your speedster hero can race to the wall and unplug it before the scientist can start the firing sequence? Or imagine Maximus trying to escape from Quicksilver by running through an open doorway, only to have Quicksilver run to the door, close it, and lock it just as Maximus barrels headlong into it.

**Defensive tactics:** Many of the previous tactics work well in a defensive situation, too. The ability to attack multiple foes can be very important, slowing or even stopping an enemy advance. This tactic can also be used to help cover any retreat the heroes need to make. These heroes' high movement rates also allow them to harass foes, making them the ultimate hit-and-run artists. The ability to move so quickly also makes these heroes excellent choices for running diversions or feints. Foes have to pay attention to heroes who can literally run circles around them.

**Airborne:** This type of hero possesses some means of flight that also represents his primary super-power, outside of possible super-strength. The Sub-Mariner (when he could fly), Wonder Man, Namorita and Nova of the New Warriors, and both the original Angel and Ms. Marvel fall into this category. The most common combat tactic of these heroes is to fly to

the enemy and engage them in melee.

Airborne heroes might have other powers or abilities that supplement their flight capabilities.



**Offensive tactics:** If their flight abilities are properly used, these heroes can accomplish a variety of functions. They can perform aerial reconnaissance before or during the battle, giving the heroes a better idea of their opposition. (The more you know about your enemy, the better prepared you'll be.) These heroes can also intercept any flying foes who could otherwise attack heroic infantry. Their flight abilities also could allow them to get behind their foes and attack any leaders, important machinery, or weapons caches. This type of attack could have the same effect as a successful infantry flanking maneuver. And any hero who can fly while invisible is a wonderful person to have around. Imagine all the security systems (including guards, dogs, and super villains) that an invisible flying hero could bypass. This particular hero would qualify for the stealth category mentioned later.

**Defensive tactics:** The main objective of airborne heroes in a defensive battle should be to prevent any aerial attacks on heroic forces who might already be overburdened. Many of the offensive tactics mentioned before could help to turn the tide in a defensive battle. Consider bombing foes with large objects, diving down onto foes (gaining bonuses on the attack), or merely scouting the battle area, looking for the foes' movements or finding a defensible position or escape route for the heroes.

**Shock troops:** These heroes, also known as "bricks," are the assorted strongmen of comics. They generally possess great strength, some degree of resistance to injury, and few or no other powers. The Thing, She-Hulk, and Colossus all qualify for this category. These heroes usually seek out foes similar to themselves in powers and abilities.

**Offensive tactics:** Shock troops are trained to lead an attack, and that is exactly what these heroes should do. Since most of them can dish out and absorb huge amounts of damage, they are the logical choice (in conjunction with speedsters) to lead any charges made by the heroes. It is often after a successful charging attack that the heroic infantry can move in. These heroes should seek out any shock troops of the enemy and engage them so that the foes' shock troops cannot harm the other heroes. Heroic shock troops can also seek out the foes' leaders or artillery heroes (described later) and eliminate them from the fight, again making things easier for the rest of the heroes.

**Defensive tactics:** Defensively, these heroes should try to do pretty much the same things that they do offensively, with a few modifications. Often, these heroes can use their strength to slow or stop any attackers by using the "Shockwave" tactic—striking the ground and setting up

shockwaves that knock foes off their feet (Advanced Set *Player's Book*, page 30), or by throwing or otherwise placing large objects in the advancing foes' path. Shock troops can also become strong points around which other heroes can rally and turn the tide. In this case, they should serve as "defensive linemen" for the hero team. Heroic shock troops should try to force the enemy to get past them in order to reach the other heroes. Similarly, they can cover any necessary retreats the heroes must make. Imagine trying to get past the Thing when he is determined to stand in your path!

**Artillery:** This type of hero has physical powers or abilities that affect targets at a distance. Some of these heroes can also fly. Examples of this type of hero are the Human Torch (I and II), Hawkeye, and Cyclops. These heroes generally do not enter melee if they help it, preferring to remain away from their foes and use their missile capabilities. Heroes having primarily "Distance Attack" powers from the Advanced Set *Player's Book* qualify for this category.

**Offensive tactics:** Beyond their combat-support role, these heroes can assist shock troops in the heroes' initial assault and can also support heroic infantry when it moves in. These heroes can use the "Groundstrike" tactic from the Advanced Set *Player's Book*, page 30, blasting the ground in front of the foes and causing injuries from the flying debris. These heroes can also clear the sky of aerial foes by literally shooting them down. They should try to stay out of physical combat and find cover from which to launch their attacks (unless they're fliers). Flying heroes of this type can get behind enemy lines and wreak much havoc.

One little-used option for this type of hero is playing the role of a sniper. This can be a very effective use of this kind of hero. Imagine Hawkeye in a dense forest, shooting arrows (from an almost completely silent weapon—his bow) at foes who are moving through or near the woods. Even if the sniper doesn't severely injure his foes, the victims most likely will send some of their forces to find him, again weakening their total strength and setting up the searchers for a possible ambush.

**Defensive tactics:** For the most part, these offensive tactics work equally well on the defensive, especially the sniper option. Artillery heroes can cover the retreat of the rest of the heroes from their positions of cover. These heroes can also keep any flying foes from harassing the retreating heroes by shooting the fliers down. Defenses can consist of some form of body armor, a force field, or even another hero acting as a "shield bearer," protecting the artillery hero from direct

attack.

**Stealth:** These heroes have powers or abilities that allow them to approach or contact enemies without their knowledge. Nightcrawler, Shadowcat, the Invisible Woman, and the Wasp all qualify for this category. Any powers that allow a hero to get into a location unnoticed (e.g., shrinking, invisibility, teleportation, wall-crawling, intangibility, etc.) qualify the hero for this category. These heroes most often use their abilities to surprise foes and fight them as best they can.

**Offensive tactics:** These heroes, like the airborne and other flyers, are excellent choices for performing reconnaissance before combat begins and acting as scouts. Infiltrating the foes' base and returning with important information can make the coming battle much easier to win. Getting behind the enemy and sabotaging or disrupting him is another option for stealth heroes. In this way, you can think of them as commandos—moving in, striking, and (if they're lucky) getting back out before their foes can react. Since these characters can often infiltrate their foes' base, they are also a good choice to set up ambushes and guerrilla hit-and-run attacks.

**Defensive tactics:** As before, getting behind the enemy, setting up ambushes, and especially performing sabotage are tactics these heroes should take when put on the defensive. These heroes can often demoralize foes if they can damage the enemy and deny the foes a chance to strike back. Stealth heroes can also often hide themselves from foes, thereby forcing those foes to use their resources to find the heroes or risk letting the heroes run around loose in their midst.

**Mentalists:** These heroes usually possess exclusively mental or mind-affecting powers that allow them to perform a wide variety of feats. Some MARVEL UNIVERSE heroes in this class are Marvel Girl, Psylocke, and Phoenix II (Rachel Summers). Any hero possessing powers primarily from the "Mental Powers" category of the Advanced Set *Player's Book* also qualifies for this category. These heroes tend to avoid melee, using their mental powers on their foes from a distance.

**Offensive tactics:** Like stealth heroes, many mentalist heroes make wonderful infiltration agents, especially if they can directly affect others' minds. Psychic reconnaissance and astrally scouting ahead for danger is also an option, usually one with very little risk. If the mentalist can cause others to see illusions, a mentalist can seriously affect the morale of opponents (imagine an illusory elephant herd charging toward the enemy as the foes prepare to attack the heroes). Ambushes are also an option, again especially if the mentalist can psychically prevent detection of himself and other heroes. Mental-

ists also make great communicators, passing information, instructions, or battle plans to other heroes who couldn't otherwise be reached due to ambient noise, darkness, etc.

**Defensive tactics:** Many of these tactics, especially illusions and ambushes, would also work equally well in defensive situations. A tactic that Psylocke has used in the past is to put into a foe's mind an illusion that causes one of her foe's allies to appear as a hero, often Psylocke herself. The victim of the illusion then attacks his ally. Mentally communicating plans or coordinating a possible heroic counterattack are further possibilities. At least in the MARVEL UNIVERSE, it is quite difficult for an enemy to sneak up on an alert hero with telepathic powers, as these telepaths often sense the thoughts of approaching foes.

**Special forces:** These are the heroes who possess such powerful, variable, or numerous super-powers, magical spells, or other abilities that they do not neatly fit into any of the previous categories. Some MARVEL UNIVERSE heroes who qualify are Thor, Quasar, Doctor Strange, the Vision, and the Silver Surfer. These heroes are so varied that any discussion of specific offensive or defensive tactics for this category of heroes as a whole is difficult. What can be done is to break down each special hero's powers into the categories above and adopt those tactics when using those powers. As an example, I'll categorize the powers of one of my favorite MARVEL UNIVERSE heroes, Thor, as he appears in the Advanced Set *Judge's Book*.

First, Thor has a degree of body armor, is immensely strong, and can inflict Shift X damage with his mystic Uru hammer, Mjolnir. This qualifies Thor for the shock-troops category. Second, by throwing Mjolnir and holding onto its thong, he can fly—qualifying Thor as airborne. Third, Thor can throw Mjolnir, and the mystic hammer also gives Thor weather-control powers (lightning bolts, winds, etc.), both of which qualify him for the artillery category. Thor can, depending upon his

choice of action, use any of the tactics of the categories listed in this example. Similar breakdowns can be performed for most other special-forces heroes.

**Power stunts:** Something must also be said about Power Stunts in the MARVEL SUPER HEROES game, and the ability to "push a power" that is present in several other super-hero game systems. Both of these concepts can give a tremendous tactical edge to the hero or heroes who devote the thought, time, and Karma to developing these abilities. The list of possible Power Stunts is far too long to describe here, but you can carefully read the "Powers" section of the Advanced Set *Player's Book* for Power Stunt ideas. Feel free to borrow ideas from the comics themselves, too. In my campaign, two heroes used a version of the X-Men's "Fast-ball Special" long before the Advanced Set came out with the official rules for that maneuver.

### Group tactics

Now that individual tactics have been noted, fitting these tactics into a coherent whole comes next. The objective of this section is to make the sum of the heroes' abilities greater than the individuals' separate powers.

Since several of the tactics mentioned here suggest splitting up the heroes to perform reconnaissance and the like, it is a good idea to divide your group into "fire teams." A fire team is a small group of heroes who work in concert whenever possible, and whose powers and abilities complement each other. One infantry hero (Wolverine), one stealth hero (Nightcrawler), one artillery hero (Cyclops), and one airborne hero (original Angel) is an example of a fire team. Working together also allows the heroes (and the players) to get used to one another's tactics, power stunts, and personalities.

Once you have fire teams set up, develop a few standard routines of action that the heroes will take whenever faced with certain situations. I remember a certain futuristic, teenage super-team from Marvel's competitor that had a coded series of such actions. The leader of the team would shout out a code phrase to alert the rest of the team as to what was going on and what to do next. It is best to keep these routines simple; the more complicated they become, the fewer applications each routine will actually have.

A classic military axiom is "Make the enemy fight your fight." If you can force the opposition to react to your actions, as opposed to you reacting to theirs, then your battle is half won. This same idea applies in sports (the best defense is a good offense). If your team sticks to your game plan (tactics), and the other team has to improvise to stop you, you stand a much greater chance of winning. For example, if your team is made up primarily of infantry and artillery heroes, you don't want to end up toe-to-toe with your

opponents' shock troops. What you probably do want is to have a running battle, hitting the enemy with your artillery heroes until the enemies close the gap. Then, with your infantry providing cover as best they can, have the artillery heroes retreat and start the process over. This should eventually wear down the opposition to the point where it is safe for the infantry to move in and finish off the foes.

### Conclusion

For more on tactics in the MARVEL SUPER HEROES game, see the tactics section in the Advanced Set *Player's Book*, pages 29-31. Also, the comics themselves are great sources for tactical inspiration. Marvel Comics' *The Avengers*, *Avengers West Coast*, *The Uncanny X-Men*, *The Fantastic Four*, *New Warriors*, and other hero-team books give good examples of some sound (and less-than-sound) tactics on the parts of both the heroes and the villains.

These tactics can also apply to other genres of RPGs, especially fantasy. Using the AD&D® game as an example, warriors are the infantry and, at higher levels, evolve into shock troops. Spell-casters, especially mages, are great examples of artillery. Rogues fit the stealth category. Psionicists easily qualify as mentalists. Most priests probably fall into the infantry category, as their spells are not generally offensive in nature and their ability to turn undead, while very important, is too specific to qualify them for shock troops. This wide variety of abilities (spells, good melee skills, and turning undead) could qualify priests as special forces, though.

Remember, GMs, that these categories and tactics apply equally well to villains as well as heroes. And remember, heroes—watch your backs, and think before you leap into the fray!

**Note:** For a similarly structured article discussing the basic personality types of heroes, see "The Mentally-Balanced Super-team," by David Rogers, in ICE's *Adventurer's Club*, issue #15, Winter 1990. The article categorizes heroic personalities. Although that article and this one were produced independently, they complement each other quite well. *Adventurer's Club* is published by Iron Crown Enterprises Inc., PO. Box 1605, Charlottesville VA 22901.

*This article is dedicated to the players of my (admittedly on-again-off-again) MARVEL SUPER HEROES game campaign: Leon, Tim, Kevin, and the casualties thereof: Donny, and Jeff. Thank you, one and all, for all the fun and for the patience to endure what I put you through.* Ω

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