

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Truth & Justice*.

I've always loved superhero comics, cartoons, movies and gaming. To me, they celebrate valor and "mad, beautiful ideas" in adventurous, stylish, and *fun* ways. What's not to love?

However, I think that the story-based aspects of the genre are often overlooked when translating amazing superhero action to gaming; the wargame-based inheritance of RPGs sometimes interferes with the vital characteristics of superhero stories. These characteristics include: the ability of dedicated, highly-trained but unpowered heroes to work successfully alongside or against individuals with superpowers; the heroism in transcending limitations and overcoming obstacles; the importance of a hero's motivations, personal ties, and behavior alongside their more-than-human talents; and the sense of freewheeling imagination and improvisation that suffuses the source material. *Truth & Justice (T&J)* is my stab at encouraging gaming that supports and enhances those qualities.

I hope you enjoy reading and playing *T&J* as much as I enjoyed writing it.

ABOUT THE PDQ SYSTEM

The rules in this book build upon the *Prose Descriptive Qualities (PDQ) System*, suitably modified for superheroic play. *PDQ Core* is available as a free download from the following URLs:

<http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com/freebies/di/pdq-core.pdf>

http://www.rpgnow.com/product_info.php?products_id=4175&

<http://e23.sjgames.com/item.html?id=ASM-000>

PDQ has been designed for evocative simplicity, speed, and flexibility in play. It currently serves as the core game mechanics for *Dead Inside: the Roleplaying Game of Loss & Redemption (DI)*; *Monkey, Ninja, Pirate, Robot: the Roleplaying Game (MNPR:RPG)*; and *Truth & Justice (T&J)*.

ABOUT ATOMIC SOCK MONKEY PRESS

<http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com/>

Atomic Sock Monkey Press is dedicated to high-quality, off-kilter, imaginative fun. Currently, that means tabletop games of both the "beer & pretzels" and roleplaying game (RPG) varieties. In the future, we may expand into other areas; but for now, Atomic Sock Monkey Press is concentrating on games.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chad Underkoffler is an editor for a telecommunications standards body by day and a freelance game writer by night. He's been gaming since 1981, to the confusion of his family. His column "Campaign in a Box" appears in Pyramid Online at <http://www.sjgames.com/pyramid> (*Chapter 7, Second-String Supers*, first appeared as a CiaB column); he has written material for *Gamma World* (Sword & Sorcery), *GURPS* (Steve Jackson Games), and *Unknown Armies* (Atlas Games); and he is the author and publisher of *Dead Inside: the Roleplaying Game of Loss & Redemption* and *Monkey, Ninja, Pirate, Robot: the RPG*. Chad currently lives in Alexandria, VA, with his wife Beth and their two black cats.



CHAPTER 1: THE SUPERHERO GENRE

A man in crazy pajamas atop a skyscraper rains laser death down on the streets. He's laughing as he does it.

Below, fires bloom for the news cameras. Reporters duck debris as they yammer on about demands and manifestoes and terror. Meanwhile, in the background, the screams of scorched innocents melt into the wail of sirens.

It makes me angry. My cheeks burn with it – or that just might be from the wind.

The madman grows closer and closer, impossibly fast. His eyes widen as he lifts his weapon in my direction. He won't make it in time.

My hands tighten into fists as I brace for impact.

I have a set of crazy pajamas of my own.

Truth & Justice (T&J) allows you to play superhuman characters gifted with extraordinary talents and abilities. These mighty beings possess staggering power and can perform tremendous deeds. Yet – beyond the flash and dazzle – they are still human, with the potential to do great good, great evil, or both.

If you want to read more on *T&J's* take on the supers genre, stick with this chapter. If you're ready and eager to start reading the *T&J* rules, turn to *Chapter 2*.

T&J PHILOSOPHY

The world is full of lies and injustice, and the day-to-day fight against them is a heroic struggle we all face. We have our personal victories and setbacks, and soldier on as best we can. But when the lies and injustices of the real world get too big for an average person to check, and truth and justice seem to fade away in the face of spin or special agendas, sometimes turning to tales of mighty and noble heroes thwarting villains can recharge the batteries.

T&J and other superhero games dramatize and romanticize the conflicts between lies and truth,

injustice and justice, harm and help, leavening the mix with wonder, mystery, costumes, and explosions. Who doesn't relish the idea of possessing the power and grit to point at something obviously wrong and say, "I'm going to stop that," and then doing it? Superhero stories allow us to imagine kicking back at fate, setting things right, making the world a better place. They allow us to explore dreams of courage with little personal risk. They are inspiring, pure, hopeful.

Superman: I'm here to fight for truth, and justice, and the American way.

Lois Lane: You're gonna end up fighting every elected official in this country!

– *Superman*

LIES VS. TRUTH

Why do people lie? Usually, to gain something or to protect themselves. While people can say something untrue without realizing they're doing so, this is just a mistake – a lie is deliberate. The lies one tells to oneself are often the most dangerous, starting with "I know I am absolutely, 100% right, despite the facts."

Lying is corrosive. It breaks down fact into opinion, distorts perspective, and breeds injustice. Even the little white lies in social conversation can leave a bad taste in one's mouth. Whether it is a child blaming a sibling for breaking a lamp, a company prevaricating over the pollution their factory is spilling into the environment, or the assertions of a madman that some other ethnic group "isn't really human," lies cloud or twist the facts. Otherwise rational people who come into the conversation late and accept lies

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at face value without question can inadvertently perform the most heinous acts.

Truth is the sword that cuts through the miasma of lies. Truth is the beacon that lights the path of justice.

Truth can be hard and unforgiving, but truth is solid: a good foundation for building. It may hurt, but that hurt is nothing compared to the suffering of those who are snarled in lies; consider a short, sharp blow side-by-side with slow strangulation. Heroes prefer the truth, for good or for ill, because they take responsibility for their actions and believe in the rightness of their cause; if their truths turn out to be wrong, they admit it and work to repair any damage they've done.

INJUSTICE VS. JUSTICE

Injustice is that which is unfair, especially unfairness that causes harm or violates another's rights. It is inequality, the belief that some people are better than or deserve more consideration than others. It unbalances the playing field, avalanching into institutional wrongs or biases that perpetually hold others back.

Justice conforms to truth. Justice looks at a situation, and determines what is equitable. Justice is higher than what is simply legal, appealing to a moral right.

But justice is *not* simply revenge. Justice is impartial, unbiased, fair; revenge seeks to punish, to cause suffering, to stop the criminal from ever performing a similar act again. Often, avengers misjudge the amount of force necessary here, and spark an ever-increasing spiral of violence as the target or their associates attempt to get revenge for the harm they perceive the target received. Justice has limits.

Mercy is one of the limits on justice. It is the ability to show compassion, clemency, or lenience to a criminal deserving of such. It is what blunts the force of overwhelming punishment, and – hopefully – the spiral of revenge. Shakespeare said that "the quality of mercy is not strained"; this means that mercy should be given freely, for one day we may be before justice ourselves, and would greatly desire it.

"A hero is no braver than an ordinary man, but he is braver five minutes longer."

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

HEROISM

A *hero* is a man or woman (sometimes called a *heroine*) who is the protagonist of a story. A hero possesses abilities in greater measure than the typical person, be they skills, talents, renown, drives, insights, or superpowers. These capabilities allow the performance of amazing or noble acts. Common heroic deeds include rescuing people, protecting innocents, creating beneficial things for society, thwarting evildoers, and slaying monsters.

Some of the most common aspects of heroism shown in comics are:

- ♦ **Courage & Honor.** The purest form of heroic action in comic books and related media are those "in defense of noble ideals," "saving the entire world," or "against overwhelming odds." In these cases, the superhero is at great risk to survive, much less prevail. This is where the rubber hits the road. Heroic actions in this vein are the big climactic types that occur at the end of a multi-issue or multi-episode story arc, and may have significant repercussions on a hero's characterization.
- ♦ **Expertise & Drive.** This is the classic "a battle of wits – or punches – with a matched foe"; examples include chasing down a serial killer, going *mano a mano* with a supervillain, or redirecting a horde of killer robots. These sorts of events put the hero in some risk, but the odds are usually – at worst – equal. These heroic actions are the meat and potatoes of superhero adventures.
- ♦ **Kindness & Charity.** This is the typical "retrieve a cat from a tree" or "rescue citizens from a burning building," where the hero acts for those who cannot. For some heroes, this may be a risky task, and thus related to the acts of courage and honor noted above. However, some heroes are really not in any danger or take little personal risk, particularly

if they can fly or are fireproof. From some perspectives, an action taken without risk is not heroic, but in these cases, the exercise of charity can be – to the beneficiaries. They don't care that getting Fluffy out of the top of the oak tree is easy for Ultrawoman, or that American Ranger can walk through fire unharmed, they appreciate that they've been given help when it was desperately needed.

It's about, as Alan Moore put it, "mad and beautiful ideas"; the sense of wonder, the feeling of marvellous secret things just beyond our field of vision, and the revelations and splendours and dangers and bastards tied up in it all...

– Warren Ellis, "*Planetary Proposal*"

MAD, BEAUTIFUL IDEAS

Superhero stories are jam-packed with "mad, beautiful ideas": concepts that grab hold of the imagination and energize the sense of wonder. Demigods meeting Atlantean royalty at the UN. Teenagers wielding the power of the sun. Magic as unconscious manipulation of environmental nanotech left in the atmosphere by alien space brothers. Telepathic apes plotting against their furless genetic cousins. Radioactive space meteors blessing or cursing the curious with great power. Giant robots fighting dinosaurs in Sheboygan. Swinging from building to building as a viable method of urban transportation. Buried pyramids that are gigantic computers. The speed of light as more a guideline than a rule.

Forget everything you know about realistic physics and remember the way you thought matter and force interacted when you were eight years old. Weight and size are directly related (what's density?); a boulder the size of a car weighs about what a car does. Using strength when moving is more effective than leverage and solid footing. Athletic folks can jump farther and higher than Olympic medalists. Lots of things explode when damaged. If something looks cool or sounds neat, it probably works – no matter how crazy or unrealistic it is. If the audience has sufficiently suspended their disbelief, these concepts can be breathtaking.



However, if your suspension is unprepared (or unwilling), they can come off as, well, *goofy*. Why would a gal who can fly wear bright, primary color long johns? How can a guy pick up a battleship without it collapsing under its own weight? Why would either of them fight crime, anyway? I was willing to give you the magic lasso, but an invisible jet? Come on!

Despite their seeming inherent silliness, these mad, beautiful ideas are part of the furniture of superhero stories and games. To complain about them (overmuch, anyway) is like grousing about all the horses and ghost towns in a Western: pointless. If you're not willing to grant at least some of these bits of a superheroic setting, maybe you shouldn't be subjecting yourself to it. You either go with the flow, or you don't. That said, there's no need for every single superhero motif to appear in a story or setting, and taking a hard look at some of their underlying sources and likely consequences can lead to new and different ideas that catch one's interest. (See also below, *Comic Book Tropes*, p. 9.)

Dreamqueen recovered from the gas pellets faster than I thought she would. She must have been drawing oneiro-energy from a couple of sleepers stashed away somewhere in the balcony of the theater. Damn.

As I shooed the hostages out the stage door, she popped out of the shadows and smashed me with a Nightmare Punch. The force of her blow sent me flying back through a half-dozen flats. I managed to grab a curtain rope before I splattered against the backstage wall.

Momentum carried me in a short arc up to the lighting catwalk. I dropped heavily onto the walkway. It was a struggle to stay conscious, to clear my head, to assure that my weapons were still functional. Only I, with neither superpowers nor magic, stood between the Sorceress of Sleep and the sanity of the entire city. Only I could bring her to justice.

Her glowing eyes pierced the darkness, locking onto mine. Deadly dream-stuff formed around her hands, building up enough charge to twist flesh and metal into pretzels. Her cruel mouth gleamed red as blood. She said my name in her poisoned-honey voice: "Manticore. Darling."

I fished a screamer out of my utility belt, armed it, threw it. With luck, it would wake up the sleepers who gave the villainess her extra power. But she had to be distracted, so she wouldn't blast it into pieces before it did its work.

Leaping into space, I fired my swingline, aiming my boots right at her raven-haired head.

SCALE

In superhero stories, it is important to realize that occurrences and effects are often on two different scales: the *normal* and the *super*.

Normal-scale is what you usually see around you: feathers and tanks and newspapers and kittycats and seven-storey buildings and algebra problems – ordinary stuff. Normal folks have varying amounts of ease or difficulty in dealing with these issues. *Super-scale* is the extraordinary stuff: giant atomic monsters and death meteors and kung-fu chi punches and erupting volcanoes and super-strong bank robbers and telepaths and hyperspace equations and unicorns and masterminds demanding one billion dollars or they'll unleash their nanotech plague on Washington. The super-scale always trumps the normal-scale – the weakest super-strong guy will be able to beat the strongest normal-scale guy at arm wrestling (or singing, forensics, piloting, etc.).

Look at old *Action Comics* issues: Superman is "invulnerable." That means that he just plain doesn't get hurt from anything ordinary: a normal guy punching him, bad guys spraying him with machinegun fire or napalm, falling off of buildings, the heartbreak of psoriasis, and so forth. However, extraordinary circumstances – like being hit in the head with a meteor, getting zapped with a million volts of electricity, being targeted by fifteen howitzers, or being blindsided by a giant robot – muss him up a little, even if they don't really hurt him permanently. And being punched by another super-strong individual hurts him as much as a normal punch would hurt a normal man. Intuitively, invulnerability is relative to super-strength: these powers counter each other. They're on the same scale.

Nevertheless, just because something is on the normal scale doesn't mean that it can't be a threat. Canny normal-scale opponents will take advantage of a superhuman's normal-scale aspects. Even if Invincible Girl can't be physically hurt, she can be emotionally hurt by someone threatening her boyfriend. Lord Fey might be able to create incredible illusions with his magic, but his flesh blisters if you touch him with iron. Teams of thugs can swarm a tougher opponent and use leverage and force of numbers to immobilize them.

This ability to avoid the majority of the pitfalls of normal-scale effects often even holds true for superhero characters who don't have powers (unless it's a specific story point). Green Arrow can get up from a fall that should have realistically left him a pavement smear. Tony Stark somehow manages to usually get away from mundane business concerns to put on his power armor. When driving the Batmobile, traffic jams aren't a problem most of the time.

For this reason, *T&J* assumes that all effects or consequences are on one or the other of these scales; how this works in specific situations (mundane abilities, superpowers, combat) will be addressed throughout the remainder of the book (see *Chapter 2, Basic Damage*, p. 22, for a quick overview). The question of how to determine the limits of each scale, and how characters – especially player characters – operate on each is related to the question of *Style* (see below). The two important things to remember about Scale are: 1) that normal-scale is ordinary; and 2) super-scale is extraordinary.

Washington, DC.

Everyone said the Jade Turtle was beautiful, a wonderful representation of T'ang Dynasty sculpture. I guess that made it inevitable that during its showing at the Met, Catastrophe would visit.

Baltimore, MD.

I was liaising with General Dickinson at the Pentagon when I got the call. I excused myself a little hastily, but, you know. Duty calls.

Havre De Grace, MD.

The wind caresses my face. My legs piston my feet against the earth. The world is a frozen blur.

Wilmington, DE.

I don't know what Catastrophe has against pretty things. Statues, paintings, concept cars, architecture, celebrities, doesn't matter: if something sets her off, she finds the closest pretty thing and breaks it.

Philadelphia, PA.

She's an attractive girl herself, if you go in for that sort of willowy brunette type. Too young for me, too skinny for me, and then there's that whole being a criminal sociopath thing.

Trenton, NJ.

Maybe she feels like she's in competition with the artwork, or something. I don't know, and frankly, I'm not sure I care. Ultrawoman normally tangles with her.

Woodbridge, NJ.

It's funny. They call me in on this, six minutes ago, because I have the best chance of getting there before something tragic happens. It's not like New York City doesn't have any superheroes.

New York City, NY.

As I approach the city, I slow enough to minimize property damage. Across the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, up 3rd Avenue, Hamilton, Brooklyn Bridge, Bowery, Broadway, Fifth Avenue, MoMA.

A security guard sprawls on the floor, his weapon in pieces. She's verbally abusing a museum lecturer. Grad student age, cute, redhead. I'm not sure if that's lucky or unlucky. I take the Jade Turtle, put it somewhere safe, and get back just in time for my "prop wash" to hit the gallery and the security alarms to go off. She spins around and gets a load of me standing in front of the flashing (empty) case. "Stop right there, Catastrophe!"

I love my job.

STYLE

NOTE - This section of the chapter delves into somewhat dense analytical material that explores the supers genre and gives a foundation in the ground rules of different supers game styles. If you want to come back to it later, you can skip ahead to p. 22.

Style is the level of consequences the setting reacts with when the characters do something; in short, it determines the cost for actions. Style is how "forgiving" reality is of stylish, daredevil actions. In a superhero setting, the relationship of effects to causes is different than that in the real world; this is where Style connects to Scale (see above). For example, if a character leaps through a storefront window, is he cut to pieces, a little nicked up, or basically unharmed?

One way to describe style is to refer back to the "ages" of comic books – the Golden Age, the Silver Age, the Bronze/Modern/"whatever the mid-Seventies to today is" Age, and so forth. These ages cover periods of publication as well as issues of history, tone, outlook, and subject matter. This is somewhat unfortunate, because each of those individual elements of an age can be picked out and utilized for a story published last week. An example

here would be Kurt Busiek's *Astro City*, often referred to as a "Neo-Silver Age" series (that is, its style is heavily influenced by, and somewhat mimics that of, comics published in the Silver Age, which was roughly mid-1950 to early 1970).

Another useful way to look at superhero styles is to adapt the scheme laid out by literary critic Northrop Frye, in his book *Anatomy of Criticism*, for discussing the different modes of fiction. The scheme breaks fiction down into modes of *myth*, *romance*, *mimetic* (*high* and *low*), and *irony* (don't worry, definitions and details for these modes will be given below). While both the purely mythic and the purely ironic modes are too *directed* to really work well in a collaborative RPG (too much stuff has to happen to reinforce the underlying mode), mixtures of the two are quite common in superhero stories.

T&J uses a combination of these two methods to boil the genre down into four basic styles that can be interesting and valuable for superhero gaming.

GRIM 'N GRITTY

Life is hard and unforgiving, and it often seems like Someone Upstairs is just messing with you for cheap laughs. Bad stuff happens to good people all the time, because that's the way it is. Fall out a second story window, and you'll break your neck and die.

Grim 'n Gritty combines the flavor of Bronze/Modern Age comics with the ironic and mimetic modes.

Bronze/Modern Age comics (roughly mid-1970s to today) have several story characteristics that make them different from the Golden and Silver Ages of comics. These include the pervasiveness of troubled heroes and anti-heroes as protagonists; increased psychological depth and characterization; the resurgence of horror and suspense as elements of superhero stories; the formal development of retroactive continuity, or retcons (see *Retcons*, p. 12); increased literary complexity (typified by works such as *Sandman*, *Watchmen*, and *The Dark Knight Returns*); and, lastly, the narrative impact of franchising and "event publishing" (an example of this is in DC Comics' *Death of Superman* arc: the character could not truly be killed, because he is a valuable piece of continuing intellectual property for the company, and the event crossed over into numerous other books and influenced their storylines). Normally, not

all of these characteristics will show up in a single Grim 'n Gritty style campaign at once.

In Frye's scheme, Grim 'n Gritty is a mixture of irony and the mimetic (especially the low mimetic). In *irony*, the hero is less than the average man – less capability, less brains, less drive – and is trapped by his environment and society. In the *low mimetic mode*, heroes are realistic people on the street like you or me; in the *high mimetic mode*, heroes are superior to other people, but not the environment or society – heroes are princes, generals, prophets, leaders of men.

Ironic superhumans usually are either comedic (like Ambush Bug) or are totally debauched caricatures (like Rebel Studio's Faust). At the depths of the "grim 'n gritty" style of the late Eighties, many "superheroes" often came off as nothing more than moody adolescents armed with big guns, which they used without any discrimination. These characters usually acted – and were specifically written to act – much, much worse than the average guy with superpowers. Furthermore, in irony, Murphy's Law trumps Newton's Laws: far too often to be coincidence, the absolute *worst* thing that could possibly happen usually does. (Intriguingly, Frye tells us that irony, pushed to extremes, returns to the mode of myth.)

Mimetic superhumans share all of the weaknesses and drives and situations that the rest of us do. They can be great at their one superpowered thing, and fail in everything else, but they soldier on as best they can. In the Sixties, Marvel Comics built their reputation on these sorts of characters, especially ones that fluctuated somewhere between the two mimetic modes. Spider-Man is the poster-boy for low mimetic superheroes – he's up, he's down, he's an average Joe that can climb walls. Captain America is an exemplar of the high mimetic superhero – he's the best of the best, a nearly perfect human specimen, but he's not superhuman. In both mimetic modes, the world is as we see it around us, and is bounded more-or-less by the probabilities of reality as we understand and experience them.

In Grim 'n Gritty style games, lies and injustice are stronger than truth and justice; heroism is wringing the small victories you can, working for a brighter tomorrow.