

PLAYING THE CON GAME: LIFE AS A CONVENTION GM

by Rod Currie

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Many years ago, at Origins '85 in Baltimore to be precise, I stumbled onto the *Champions* tournament run by the Hero Auxiliary Corps (now Infinite Imaginations, Inc.). My views on convention gaming changed forever. The HAC *Champions* tournament was an annual event using the same team of characters every year, with each year's adventure building on what came before. In short, it was an ongoing campaign with one game session per year.

But the ongoing campaign aspect of the HAC tournament was not the only thing to capture my interest, it was also my introduction to "moral dilemma" *Champions*. That is, each tournament built to the team needing to make a big decision at the end of the second round (which featured the best players from several runs of the first round), usually with various team members falling on different sides of the issue. This often led to entertaining roleplaying. And because I had always been far more interested in roleplaying than in just beating up villains, these events had tremendous appeal to me.

After several years of playing in a variety of HAC events, Ray Greer, one of the original Hero Games partners, began to ask me when I was going to run something. I usually brushed him off with some comment like, "Nah, I have too much fun playing," but in the back of my mind, ideas began to brew.

In 1991, I became involved with a local gaming convention, and decided it was finally time to give this convention GM thing a whirl. Unfortunately, low attendance prevented my game from really coming off, so I put the idea on the back burner.

Finally, at Origins '96, I decided to try again at a major convention where I knew the pool of potential gamers would be greater and the event was successful. That was the first of five different SuperSquad America events I ran at GenCon and/or Origins over the next several years.

Based on the comments of players who have participated in my events, I think I have done a pretty good job, so I thought that some of you out there who are thinking of running a convention game might like to hear about how I put together the team, the world, and their adventures.

SPECIAL THANKS

In addition to Ray Greer, Ronald M. Green, and Kerry Connell, whose help and influence have been noted in the main article, I would like to thank the original Hero Auxiliary Corps, Keith Hannigan, Marc Blumberg, and Mike Maloney for inspiring the structure and moral dilemma aspects of the event; Sue Grau and the other GMs of Infinite Imaginations, Inc., who have carried on the HAC tradition of great HERO System events and continue to inspire me to this day; past and present incarnations of Hero Games, who have provided prizes for these events; the many GMs and fellow players from the original campaigns which gave birth to many SuperSquad America team members; and finally, all of the players from SuperSquad America events, who have shown me new sides to old characters and who, through their roleplaying and decision making, have influenced the direction of past and future events. All of you have helped make running the SuperSquad America events an entertaining and satisfying experience.

WHAT IF?

As indicated in this article, the SuperSquad America events are set in their own specific world.

However, there is no reason that, with a few changes, these events could not be run in the Champions Universe.

First, SuperSquad America would be one of the premiere teams in the Champions Universe's America, as opposed to clearly being the country's number one team. And, of course, the original Challenger would no longer be the first superhero but merely a prominent one. I would also consider basing the team in another city, perhaps Washington, D.C., because New York City already has both the Justice Squadron and the Sentinels.

Second, the agencies described in this article would be redundant in the Champions Universe.

I would probably substitute ARGENT for EUREKA, given that both groups are international in scope and share a technological/scientific basis. Instead of EAGLES, I would use PRIMUS, another American agency set up to deal with superhuman threats. I would have L'Instiut Thoth take the place of OASIS in the role of super science agency.

Finally, I would replace some of the major SuperSquad America villains with major villains in the Champions Universe. For example, Dr. Destroyer would substitute for DeathGrip. While Destroyer is much more powerful than DeathGrip, both are megalomaniacal villains in powered armor who are considered among the most dangerous threats in their respective universes. Similarly, Teleios, the Perfect Man could easily replace Dr. DNA in the role of evil genetic scientist.

CREATING THE SUPERSQUAD AMERICA TEAM

Once I decided to run a *Champions* convention game in the Hero Auxiliary Corps style, the first thing I needed was a superhero team to feature. I started with the name: SuperSquad America. I had used the name for an NPC hero team in a couple of my campaigns and had grown fond of it. Plus, it felt right. It clearly indicated that this was a superhero team, likely one of some prominence, since they had taken on a national name, as opposed to calling themselves something like SuperSquad Altoona. It also indicated the five-color (four-color with a touch of gray) feel I was aiming for with the event.

At this point, I also chose to base SuperSquad America in New York City, a city seemingly made for superheroic adventuring. And, again borrowing an idea from one of my campaigns, I would give the team a headquarters in a former Broadway theatre.

Now that I had a name and base of operations for my team, I needed to fill out its roster. To do so, I followed the example of my good friend, Ronald M. Green, who had created a convention superhero team from characters he had played in various campaigns.

Like most *Champions* players, I had played a variety of characters over the years, so I had a good selection from which to choose. However, when it came to putting them together as a team, I looked at four aspects of each character: their powers, their personality, their role in the team, and their potential for looking at issues differently from their teammates. Each character's powers should be somewhat unique on the team, his personality and role on the team should provide good roleplaying hooks, and finally, his differing outlook should serve to intensify any argument surrounding the solution to an adventure's moral dilemma. To accomplish this, I would need to make some changes to each potential member of the team.

CHALLENGER

I started with the team leader. For this position, there was really only one choice. I don't usually play leaders in campaigns, but Challenger was the one character I had designed to fill such a role. Challenger was an American patriot, and the son of a great hero of the same name. He wore a battlesuit that enhanced his strength and agility to make up for the fact he had not inherited superpowers from his father.

His patriotism, business-like approach to superheroing, and desire to live up to his father's legacy would make good role-playing hooks for players; And since he was primarily a skilled

martial artist, his abilities would be simple enough to manage, without getting in the way of being the team leader.

Challenger was also a wealthy industrialist who ran his own company, which would give the team some access to the upper echelons of American society. He also had a private plane, which, because he had a public identity, could be used to transport the team when needed.

For the SuperSquad America event, I decided the original Challenger had led the first incarnation of SuperSquad America back in the 1960s. This not only provided additional backstory for the event, but also gave the son something else to live up to.

RICK DAVIES, THE RESILIENT RUBBER-MAN

Rick was a fun-loving stretching character who liked publicity, loved comic books and science fiction, and grew up admiring superheroes. While the public believed he got his powers by falling into a vat of experimental rubber, in truth, he was the prototype for Project Victory, a top secret government project to build a superhero team. This project had failed drastically when a group of agents from EUREKA (the European Underground Research Establishment for Knowledge Advancement) attacked, killed the project leader, and kidnapped the other subjects to brainwash them into being supervillains.

This was all part of Rick's background in the original campaign in which I played him and dropped nicely without modification into the SuperSquad America world.

One important aspect of Rick, to me, was his search for a surrogate father, since his own had run out on the family when Rick was young. In the original campaign, another Player Character, a retired super spy, had filled this role. For the SuperSquad America version, I made the original Challenger an advisor on Project Victory and had the two develop a pseudo father-son relationship.

As a result, the current Challenger would resent Rick's closeness to his father, and Rick would be overly critical of Challenger when comparing him to the original, resulting in a rivalry between the two. Making Rick SuperSquad America's deputy leader and their differing views on superhero teams would intensify this rivalry and provide conflict, which is always good for interesting roleplaying opportunities.

SILVER BOW

Originally created as a Spiderman-Hawkeye mix and later becoming a religious crusader in the original campaign, Silver Bow was a female archer with a swingline and some martial arts. However, I already had a fun-loving character in Rick, and the religious crusader bit never really worked for me, so I chose to redo her background.

Like Challenger, Silver Bow was always envisioned as a second-generation hero. So, I kept the bit about her father being Silver Archer, a very good normal archer with lots of trick arrows, and made her mother a hero as well – specifically, the martial artist Finesse. To explain why Silver Bow had enhanced strength and agility, I made Finesse a princess from the extradimensional magical world of Eyratha where the royal family all had superpowers.

I also created a backstory where the Silver Archer had helped save Eyratha from an evil wizard, and while there, he and the princess fell in love. As a reward, the king granted the archer his daughter's hand in marriage, and a magical bow.

As for her personality, I felt the team needed a gritty, streetwise character, and Silver Bow was a good candidate for that role. To that effect, I decided that she had come home from the university one night to find her parents, who had retired from the superhero business some years before, murdered in their sleep by a thirteen-year-old junkie looking for cash. Silver Bow took up the hero game, determined

to clean up the streets, torn between this desire and the sense of fair play instilled in her by her parents. I also gave her skills like Streetwise, Persuasion, Conversation, and Interrogation that would be useful in accomplishing her goals, and gave her Dirty Infighting as her Martial Arts package.

Finally, since both she and Challenger were children of heroes, I made her parents teammates of the original Challenger, and she and the current Challenger old friends, who had even tried dating at one point in the past. This gave me a character who again had good solid roleplaying hooks, and a slightly different approach to the superhero business.

CRIMSON FIST

Crimson Fist was my character in a short *Golden Age Champions* campaign. His primary ability was to manifest a field of glowing crimson energy around himself. This field protected him, allowed him to fly, and could be projected in the form of a large crimson fist. In adding him to SuperSquad America, I upgraded his powers so that he could project the crimson energy in a variety of shapes besides just a fist, and made his powers innate rather than focused in a mystical amulet.

His origin as a golden age character had dealt with him finding the amulet on an archaeological dig in Egypt, but that story no longer seemed appropriate. Because Crimson Fist was likely to be the flashiest and one of the most powerful heroes on the team, I thought it would be interesting to make him a reluctant hero who had had his powers thrust upon on him.

Thus, his new origin became that he and a friend were kidnapped by the villainous Dr. DNA, who gave them both crimson energy powers and brainwashed them into working for him. On their first outing, his friend Donna broke free of the brainwashing, and turned on the doctor, who killed her. Seeing his friend die, Crimson Fist's anger broke through the brainwashing and he managed to apprehend Dr. DNA.

Cursed with these unwanted powers, he felt he had no choice but to be a superhero, even though he was not totally secure in that role, often using sarcastic wisecracks to cover his insecurities. Being an ordinary guy who was not comfortable as a hero, he too would have a unique point of view.

FORETHOUGHT

Forethought was a telepath who gets her name from the precognitive flashes she gets of dangerous things about to happen (*i.e.*, Danger Sense). Because Forethought's origin in her original campaign had involved her powers being triggered when she was raped, I gave serious thought to changing it to avoid offending players. However, my event was intended for mature roleplayers, so I decided to take the risk and leave it unchanged.

Personality-wise, the rape had left her shy, slightly withdrawn, and distrustful of men. Also, the triggering of her powers had put her assailant into a coma for several months, and made her worried about misusing her powers. This would make her a challenging character to roleplay, and an even more challenging character for me to judge because of her low-key nature.

Also, with such a tragic background, she would likely empathize with others in such a situation, something her teammates may or may not be able to do.

DYNAMO

I chose Dynamo for the team because of his unusual powers. While on the surface, he simply had electrical powers (a force field, an energy blast, and the ability to travel through electrical wires), in truth, he was also a cyberkinetic who could sense and control electrical and electronic equipment.

As for his personality, Dynamo worried about his cyberkinetic abilities, meaning he would be unlikely to walk up to a banking machine and empty it of cash unless it was for a very good reason. He was also cocky about his ability as a computer programmer (even without using his powers) and a bit of a wisecracker. Finally, because I felt the character needed something extra and the original scenario I planned for the local convention dealt with AIDS, I decided to make Dynamo gay and in the closet. I figured this would give him a strong opinion on that issue and would color how he saw other situations. Again, because I was aiming for mature players, I felt comfortable with including a homosexual character.

WHIZ KID

Whiz Kid was a teenaged speedster whose mind worked just as fast as his feet. He was just sixteen years old and already had a Ph.D. in physics. Originally, I had played him in a mini-campaign where he had been an orphan being raised by his grandmother. For SuperSquad America, I changed his background and had him raised by his single mother. As I thought about his mother, Dianne Armstrong, she seemed a good choice to be the team's administrative assistant, a position she would have taken to keep an eye on her teenaged son.

Because his brain worked much faster than most people's, Whiz Kid hated not doing anything, and liked to keep busy at all times. As well, he usually could not resist an intellectual challenge, and despite his name, which he felt was clever, he hated being treated as anything but an adult.

While Whiz Kid did not do as much pure damage as many of the other SuperSquad members, his speed and intelligence would make him valuable in a support role, and would let him attempt tasks the others would not even consider. Finally, the difference in age and intelligence would cause him to view the world differently.

FRICTION LASS

When it came to choosing the eighth and final member of SuperSquad America, I had three main possibilities from which to choose. I considered Professor Plasma, but his powers were too similar to Crimson Fist's for my liking. Gauntlet, another candidate, was a brick in powered armor. And while the team lacked a truly strong character, both Rick and Crimson Fist (with his Telekinesis) were fairly strong and could absorb fair amounts of damage, and I already had one character in a battle suit. So, Gauntlet, too, did not make the cut.

That left Friction Lass. While Rick Davies the Resilient Rubber-Man already filled the silly name niche, Friction Lass did have other things to recommend her. Her name not only accurately described her ability to control friction and air resistance, but it also described the effect she created when she was with others. Basically, she was gorgeous and she knew it, and loved using her looks to manipulate men. She was happiest when she was the center of attention, getting her own way. Putting her on the team would create a lot of "friction" – especially with her female teammates – and on any issue, Friction Lass would undoubtedly choose the side that benefited her the most.

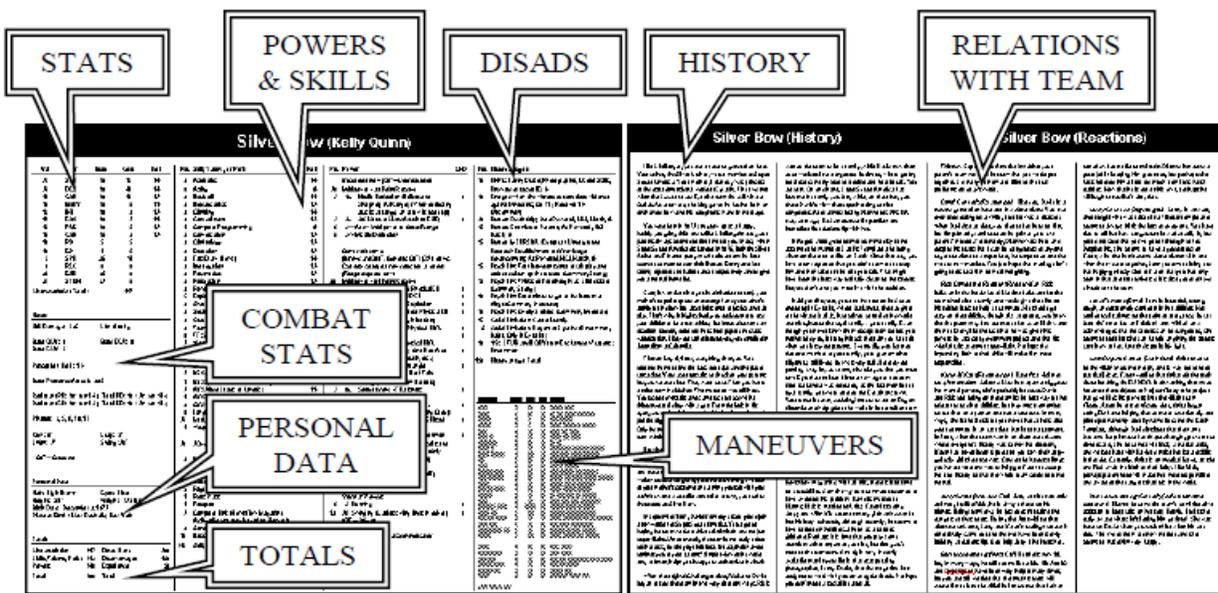
FINALIZING THE CHARACTERS

Once I had decided on the team's lineup, I began to look in more detail at how the characters would fit together. Silver Bow became a pseudo-big-sister and protector to Forethought; Forethought and Crimson Fist were given a mutual attraction to each other, but both were afraid, for their own reasons, to act on it; Whiz Kid was given a crush on the older Friction Lass; Friction Lass' publisher father was made the owner of the magazine Silver Bow worked for in her secret identity; and so on.

To make these relationships between characters clear to the players, I added a section to each character sheet describing how the character felt about each of the others (and Dianne, their administrative assistant). For example, Silver Bow's sheet noted how she felt Friction Lass was setting the cause of women back thirty years ago with her skimpy costume, her shop-till-you-drop attitude, and the shameless way she threw herself at men; while Challenger's sheet noted that he felt Rick Davies the Resilient Rubber-Man was a dumb name for a hero.

I also fleshed out other pieces of basic personal information about each hero, such as date and place of birth, hair and eye color, and height and weight. Knowing the information I wanted on each sheet, I set out to design the actual character sheets. After a few attempts, I decided to use a standard 8½" by 11" piece of paper turned sideways. One side would contain the standard character sheet information, along with the basic personal information, while the other side would contain the character's backstory along with his opinions of his teammates.

As I prepared for the fourth year of SuperSquad America, I decided that it would be a nice extra for players in the tournament to see what the characters looked like. As a result, I commissioned an artist, my fellow Infinite Imaginations Inc. GM Kerry Connell, to create drawings of each of the team members. So, from the fourth year on, each player had a cardboard stand-up in front of them with their character's portrait, along with both their superhero and civilian names. This provided not only a visual for each character, but also made it easy for everyone, including me, to remember who was playing which character.



CREATING THE WORLD OF SUPERSQUAD AMERICA

When I was writing the backgrounds of the characters, I had made certain decisions about the world in which SuperSquad America existed. For example, every member of the team was hunted by DeathGrip, a supervillain in power armor who, like most such villains, had his sights set on conquering the world. In addition, various backgrounds had mentioned the organizations EUREKA, EAGLES, and OASIS. These were all organizations I had used in other campaigns and dropped into the SuperSquad universe.

EUREKA, as mentioned earlier, was the European Underground Research Establishment for Knowledge Advancement. It was a collection of European scientists who had turned their talents toward evil, and were primarily interested in the acquisition of knowledge and technology. Working for EUREKA was the supervillain team Victory. Victory was the superpowered subjects created by Project Victory, kidnapped by EUREKA, and brainwashed into being villains.

EAGLES was the Elite American Group for Law Enforcement and Security, an American agency created to deal with superpowered threats. While EAGLES had no superheroes on its payroll, it did have well-equipped agents, and maintained strong relations with established heroes. It also maintained a database of villains and heroes for the PCs to draw on.

OASIS was the Office of American Scientific Investigative Studies, a government sponsored laboratory. Both Rick and Whiz Kid were scientists as well as superheroes, so this would be a good place for them to work. I also chose to make OASIS and EAGLES jointly responsible for Project Victory, the project that gave Rick his superpowers.

As I sat down to create the SuperSquad America scenario for Origins '96, this was all I knew about the world the heroes lived in; however, in most cases, as I created each year's scenario, a little more was added.

In the first year, the adventure dealt with the life and death of Steven Kennedy, the original Challenger, so I worked out his backstory. He was the world's first superhero who had been labeled by President John F. Kennedy (no relation) as "a hero to meet the challenge of the new frontier." I also detailed the history of the original SuperSquad America and its members. And finally, because the adventure would take the team to my native Canada, I outlined the Canadian national superhero team, the Peacekeepers.

Because the second year's adventure dealt with EUREKA employing the process that was used to create Rick Davies the Resilient Rubber-Man, but this time to kill superheroes, I created additional information on both Project Victory and the process itself. Also, the nature of the plot forced me to outline several other heroes, villains, and teams residing in the SuperSquad universe.

Year three centered around a mystical occurrence mentioned in the first adventure, and forced to me examine at least part of the cosmology and mysticism of the universe. This examination continued when I created the fourth year's adventure, which was an outgrowth of the events of the third year. That year also took the characters to Eyratha, the extra-dimensional homeworld of Silver Bow's mother.

For the first time, the creation of the fifth year's adventure did not involve any significant additions to the world, although I am certain as I continue creating new adventures for this team, the world will continue to grow and evolve.

CREATING A SUPERSQUAD AMERICA SCENARIO

From the beginning, I knew that I wanted SuperSquad America to be a dynamic team that would grow and change with time, and that such changes should be brought about by the decisions made by the players portraying the characters. Also, I wanted the adventures of SuperSquad America to be unique to that team, and not just be generic superhero adventures that could be handled by any generic superteam.

As a result, the first thing I look at when creating each year's event is the logical consequences of the previous year's adventure. If I ran the previous year's event only once, then the results of that final round make up the official history. If I ran it more than once (for example, at both Origins and GenCon), I

create an official history based on an amalgamation of the final rounds. In some cases, the choices made may immediately give me an idea for the next adventure.

For example, in the third year, Dynamo chose to become the new Earth Template, a being whose own tone and nature sets the general tone and nature for life on Earth (and its related dimensions). What effect would this choice have on the world? Well, as a cyberkinetic, Dynamo had a highly technological bent and thus, with him as Template, the delicate balance between magic and technology would be tipped towards technology. This would cause problems on both Earth and the magic-based extra-dimensional homeworld of Silver Bow's mother, Eyratha. With this simple starting point, I had the basis for the fourth year's adventure.

Another starting point that I have used for SuperSquad America adventures is the characters' histories. For example, the first year's adventure dealt with the death of the original Challenger and involved Dr. DNA, the villain who gave Crimson Fist his powers. And in the second year, I used EUREKA's theft of the process that created Rick Davies as the basis for the adventure.

Once I have the basic idea for the year's adventure, it's time to work out the details. My first step is to usually determine the big question that will end the second round. As described earlier, this should be an important question that will ideally divide the team on how to answer it.

Once I know my ending, I can create the rest of the scenario leading up to it.

Because I run the SuperSquad America events by myself, I do not need to create an elaborate write-up of the adventure, but can instead get by with a brief plot outline, character sheets for the villains involved, and a solid understanding of what is going on. This lets me be more spontaneous when I am running the adventure and tailor it more to the actions of each group of players.

A typical SuperSquad America adventure has a fairly simple structure. The first round is usually structured something like this:

- Introductory Phase
- Intrusion Phase
- Investigation Phase
- Confrontation Phase

Generally, the Introductory Phase has the team doing something fairly mundane: attending a party, visiting a dying hero in the hospital, doing a TV interview, etc. This allows the players to briefly explore their characters' personalities and relationships, and in the case of something like a TV interview, actually answer questions in character.

The Intrusion Phase is where the actual adventure intrudes. This could be an attack by villains, an unusual event occurring, or an NPC informing the team of something going on. This is often where the first combat of the adventure occurs. Such a combat is usually designed to be short and quick and if necessary, in play, can be stopped once the outcome is fairly obvious. For this and all combats, I usually prepare a Combat Record Sheet (similar to the one in the *HERO System Resource Kit*) showing all of the possible participants, along with the SPD, DEX, and other relevant combat information for each. With the combatants listed in descending DEX order and each one's phases marked off, this sheet makes it very easy to tell whose turn it is to act next, and we can proceed through the combat quickly.

If the adventure did not begin with an interview of some type, I will usually insert an encounter with an inquisitive press here. Whether it occurs here or earlier, these questioning scenes serve not only to get the players thinking and speaking in character, but also, through the questions asked by the press, let me introduce possible themes that I feel are important to the adventure. That's why, despite my

tendency to go with a fairly brief outline, I normally fully script out the questions that are to be asked, so I can cover the themes I want to introduce, and also ensure that I have questions for everyone on the team.

The Investigation Phase is usually fairly freeform as the characters are given a chance to use their individual abilities to discover more about what is going on. For this phase, I simply prepare a list of possible information sources and what information they have. Usually, a piece of information is available from more than one source, but if it is only available from a single source, I usually have multiple ways for the characters to get to that source. If the players ever seem to be stuck on how to proceed, I use Deduction Rolls (or other skill rolls) to point them in the right direction, or have an NPC (such as Challenger's contact, Major Jeffery Knox, the head of EAGLES) provide them with a key clue to get them moving again. This phase of the adventure is also a good place to introduce some colorful NPCs that the players can have fun interacting with.

Once the characters have learned enough about what's going, it's time for the Confrontation Phase. Normally, this will take place in a location that the characters have been led to by the information acquired during the Investigation Phase, and brings SuperSquad face-to-face with either the major villain of the adventure, or his agents. Inevitably, this leads to a combat. This combat usually sets up the cliffhanger ending for the first round. For example, it might be a one-sided affair that leaves SuperSquad America in the clutches of the major villain, or it might result in the revelation of a key piece of information, or it might simply force the team to take certain actions. In any event, this combat and its immediate aftermath should leave the players wanting to know what happens next, and encourage the players chosen for advancement to come back for the second round.

While I often use this structure for creating my first rounds, it is not written in stone, and other than ending the round on an interesting cliffhanger, I feel no obligation to use it for all SuperSquad adventures. However, in general, I like the first round to be standard *Champions* with an emphasis on combat and investigation, but with some good opportunities for roleplaying.

The second round, however, is a completely different ballgame. With any luck, the players who advance to that round are all good, if not great, roleplayers. For that reason, I usually, but not always, make the second round much more roleplaying-intensive. Generally, I will very loosely plot the round starting with a resolution to the round one cliffhanger and ending with the big moral dilemma that I have built the event around. This loose plot usually leaves room for significant input by the players into what happens. For example, in year four, when the characters visited the Forest of Futures in the extradimensional realm of Eyratha, each player got to create the vision of a likely future his character saw.

Once I have created the adventure, I update the character sheets for the team. I usually give each character about 10 or 15 experience points to represent what they have earned since the last adventure. I also occasionally modify the Disadvantages lists to more accurately reflect the character's current state. Such changes are often related to what has happened in the previous adventure, but I also like to extrapolate on what else has happened to the characters since then and include that in my updates. Often, this involves advancing or creating sub-plots that deal with the character's personal life. Once the main character sheet has been updated for a character, I then update the history and character reaction sections of the character sheets to also reflect these changes. In addition, during this updating, I look for places where I can emphasize personality traits and opinions that are likely to be key in that year's adventure.

Finally, I update the world history handout that summarizes the previous years' adventures, so that new players can get a glimpse of what has gone before. Then, with the creative work done, I print off

the adventure and the character sheets (enough for all runs including the final, plus some extras just in case) and I am ready to go.

FINAL THOUGHTS

So, there you have it. That's how I put together my SuperSquad America convention events. This, of course, is not the only way to put together such an event. There are probably almost as many ways of running convention games as there are convention GMs. Find a style that works for you and use it.

This article originally appeared in Issue 9 (April 2003) of Hero Games' digital magazine Digital Hero.