



CITY OF HEROES

City of Heroes Diary, Volume 1

Lead Designer Jack Emmert on the three basic rules that guide every aspect of Cryptic's superhero-themed title

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By IGN Staff

Now the greatest metropolis in America, Paragon City began in the 18th century as a quiet group of colonial coastal villages. By the time of the bloody Civil War, its location had helped it become a major port. After that conflict came decades of prosperity and continued expansion as a center for industry, science and commerce, which left it particularly vulnerable to the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. The collapse of the economic order brought both social and political chaos. Various criminal elements, both organized and random, quickly moved in to take advantage. Through bribery, intimidation and murder, the mobs seized control. Corruption became ubiquitous. With every politician and cop seemingly on the take, there was no one to stand for the ordinary citizens and the cause of justice - until The Statesman.

Over the ensuing decades, Paragon City attracted more super-powered heroes than anywhere else on the planet, but even their combined efforts proved unable to eliminate crime completely. As a result, when [Cryptic Studios' City of Heroes](#) launches next year, players will take up the cause of good. Using a system that allows nearly countless variations, they will create avatars that will then set forth to



prosperity has drawn a number of formidable villain organizations. These groups will offer up a diverse range of nefarious and powerful adversaries including supervillains, aliens, madmen, underground monsters, gangsters and more. Following a revision of the design that began late last year, Lead Designer Jack Emmert kicks off a series of diaries on this intriguing project.

Have you played **City of Heroes**?

YES

NO

On Designing [City of Heroes](#)

[Cryptic Studios](#) came together in July, 2000 in order to bring to life a particular game, a comic book hero MMORPG. We were naturally excited and enthusiastic because the idea seemed so obviously awesome. Who wouldn't want to be a hero? Who wouldn't want to fight evil? Or save the world? Everyone goes through that period where they read comics. Some of us grow out of it, others (like me) keep reading for decades. Either way, comic books and their heroes have left an indelible mark in America's collective childhood.

We labored for the first couple of years, in fits and starts, towards creating the original vision for the game. We pounded out rules and regulations; we documented the background of everything from the city zones to the super villains. But one thing we never did was consider the big picture. What was [City of Heroes](#) going to stand for? What were the organizing principles behind the game?

I'm sure that many in the gaming industry dismiss such philosophical questions as



about that, but when you are making a game - where do you start? way back in 2000, we started with the list of powers (I think) - then moved on to things such as combat. It never occurred to us to step back and consider... "Well, what sort of powers do we want to have?" Generic ones? Ones specifically tied to the universe of the City of Heroes? Or combat. What was the experience we were aiming for? All of these goals remained silently in the background. We never voiced them. and yet still assumed that they would somehow guide a team of 20-plus.

Now, people who have been following the development of City of Heroes over time know that we have gone through some design changes. I'm not going to get into the whys and hows yet, though I promise that I'll delve into it at a later date. But when I, as lead designer, sat down in January to redirect the course of City of Heroes, I was able to vocalize those design goals that had been previously left unsaid. I found when I started with these guiding rules, that the actual process of design became much, much easier.

The City of Heroes design doc begins by laying down three basic rules. I confess that there are others, but these are of primary importance. They influence every decision, from design to art to programming. These are the things that define the City of Heroes.

Aspire for an "E" Rating

Now I mentioned this as an aside in a recent cover story in PC Gamer - never in my wildest dreams did I think it would invoke a firestorm of controversy. "Oh no - he's trying to make a Disney game!" "[NCsoft](#) marketing is forcing them to do this!" "This game is going to suxxor!" I could only smirk at the misunderstandings, and outright laugh at the conspiracy theories.

The reason why this is important is very simple; City of Heroes is trying to capture the magic of comic books. Many people are first introduced to comics around the age of nine. Some read for years, some don't. Each and every time I pick up a comic book, I'm catapulted back to that age - when there were such things as



the gloating villain would learn to eat his words.

As an adult, I know all too well that these things don't really happen. The world's moral ambiguities muddle terms such as good and evil. One man's dictator is another man's savior. Wars don't end in triumph; they slowly wane into occupation and rebuilding. These processes are just as long, and at times, just as fruitless, as war itself. Some wars still don't end. Parts of the world are so resistant to peace that we've almost come to think that the chaos is endemic to the land itself. The newspapers tell me everyday about meaningless catastrophes that ruin and destroy human lives. I turn to comic books to show me something better - to offer me a hope that things can be different.

THAT is what I mean by "E" - a return to values where good is good, and bad is bad. In City of Heroes, players are heroes - period. It's a place where anyone can come, and after a long day at a hard job, feel as if they are doing something that helps the world. Yes, it's a virtual world, but it doesn't lessen the feeling of success when going to bed at night.

In practical terms, it means that we will avoid delving into the drug trade. You won't see cocaine, heroin or marijuana in Paragon City. You won't see prostitution. The five o'clock news has got those things in spades, if you want them. Yes, there are drugs - ones that are fictional and written into the background of the city. You won't see explicit violence; there are many other games that do this successfully. You won't see racism. You won't see profanity.

There WILL be things such as death and disaster - because those are essential ingredients for any hero. Without them, heroes cannot be born. Our players will be forged in the crucible that is Paragon City. Should they survive, they will save the city and the world. Those consequences are real and moving - and exactly what this game stands for.

Given all this, I have about as much chance of winning the lottery as City of Heroes has of getting an "E" rating. It's almost a rock solid certainty we will get a "T" for



comic book heroes in general, are all firmly based in childhood fantasies and dreams. And we at Cryptic should never forget that.

No Camp

Nothing embodies camp more than the Batman TV series of the '60s. Ridiculous plots, villains, dialogue, and those darn "pow," "zap," and "wham" effects made the series funny for the audience and the actors alike. But the problem with camp is that it's like cotton candy - the enjoyment passes too quickly.

The comic book hero "renaissance" embodied in the recent spate of movies (X-Men, Spider-Man, Daredevil, Hulk) has eschewed the "camp" heritage of the Batman TV series. Even the Batman movie series, when successful, avoided outright humor like the plague. As the series plodded forward, it turned towards camp - and what do you know - the series died.

People tend to underestimate the whole genre of comic books and sequential art in general. It's demeaned as "funny books," and by extension, so are its characters. I doubt that most adults, in their depths of their hearts, think Spider Man is anything but a kid's tale (despite the great movie). I believe that there's an automatic tendency to look down on and dismiss comic book heroes.

But City of Heroes immerses players into a universe of these characters. If we were to begin making fun of the very things that define our game, it's unlikely that people would then be able to identify themselves with the heroes they create. And if they don't do that, they won't play for long. Oh, maybe here and there - but nothing like we hope and want them to. As a lead designer, I want people to delve into my world and make it theirs. I'm not trying to write something just for entertainment's sake; I'm trying to create what will be a shared world where every player feels as if they are guiding the story. Camp would detract from this.

Fast and Furious

The world of a comic book hero seems to fly by at a 100 miles a minute. One day,



Classic bouts between villains and heroes, usually take up only a few scant pages. I guess that this is why the most successful super hero video games had until recently been fighting games (though Freedom Force broke the mold, I think).

We wanted, therefore, to capture this "fast and furious" feeling. We wanted combat to be a swirling morass - where only the players are left standing at the end. The "fast" is reflected in the overall speed of players' attacks and the pace of combat.

The "furious" is captured by the fact that players are powerful from the start. They don't need to wrestle with sewer rats before they can start tackling alligators. From day one, a player hero will tackle a number of thugs and be able to triumph. He'll face-off against other super-powered opponents, and survive. The whole point is that the player is a "hero" - not a feeble peasant working his way up to knight. He starts at "great" and works his way up to "ungodly."

In practice, this means that players sometimes face dozens of lesser minions on their way to tackling more powerful attacks. It means that players need to plan and coordinate their attacks before battle begins. It means that if problems arise during combat, players need to notice it immediately, or suffer dire consequences.

This particular ideology stretches beyond just combat. It also finds its way into even the prosaic realm of traveling. In fantasy games, travel is a lengthy process - and well it should be - medieval traveling was a tedious thing. And travel is also integral to exploring the realms and learning where certain monsters live and so forth. In City of Heroes, getting to places isn't as much of a problem. Players already run a default four-minute mile. And then there are travel powers such as leaping, flying, super speed and teleport. It means that exploration in our game is more directed; we point to certain areas and say "go here." Trial and error isn't as much a part of the process as in our fantasy counterparts.

So those three principles guided our redesign process in January, and in fact, had informally shaped the game from the beginning. But once they were spelled out -



point for all of our discussions.

Until next time - see you in Paragon City!

Jack Emmert

Lead Designer, City of Heroes

Cryptic Studios

Was this article informative?

YES

NO

In This Article



City of Heroes

Summary: Realize your comic book dreams in this massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that is home to an entire universe of super-powered heroes and villains. Build your own...

Franchises: City of Heroes & City of Villains

Genres: RPG



Suggestive Themes,
Violence

Platforms: PC, Macintosh

Developers: NCsoft, Cryptic Studios

Publishers: NCsoft

Features: Number Of Players, Online

Release Date: April 26, 2004