



CITY OF HEROES

City of Heroes Diary, Volume 2

Cryptic's Jack Emmert tells us about the decision to change the superhero creation system and the first attempt.

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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 continues his series of diaries on this intriguing project.

Have you played City of Heroes?

YES

NO

On Origins, Levels & Classes

In the course of the [City of Heroes](#) development cycle, we've had to make changes from time to time. Perhaps one of the biggest changes in direction that we've made was the decision to go towards Archetypes, akin to a "class" in other RPGs, and abandon our original vision of "make any hero you want." Some fans have perceived this as such a wild change in our game that we must have been forced to do it by our publisher. After all, comic book heroes don't have classes! The story behind Archetypes reveals a little about how [City of Heroes](#) has come along in the past couple of years...

For those who aren't familiar with the original version of City of Heroes, we had a character creation system where a player would allocate points into various attributes, powers and skills. Nothing limited your choices; a player could choose anything he or she wanted. There were no "levels" that are so familiar to RPG fans; only the total amount of these points determined how strong the player was.



for powers came from the hero's origin. The seven origins determined how many powers a player could have as well as how powerful they could become. A mutant hero, for example, could have as many as eight powers, but couldn't raise them to their maximum level. A scientifically altered hero, on the other hand, could have only five powers, but would be able to raise them to a power level above that of the mutant.

As game development progressed, we noticed more and more issues with this system. The first, and largest, problem was that people would often pick a poor selection of initial powers. A fledgling hero would choose the powers flight and invulnerability - but then end up with no offensive abilities. Or another person would put all their available points into a single power - say, Power Punch. The resulting hero would have a single devastating attack, but without any defense powers, and would quickly fall in defeat. A second problem was that knowledgeable players would end up creating cookie cutter heroes. Team-ups ended up being just a group of like heroes, and that was pretty boring. Finally, it was just plain difficult to balance powers given the flexibility of the system.

We attempted to address these issues a number of times. After all, from a role-playing point of view, we liked the flexibility of the system. But from a multiplayer point of view, we had to ensure that it was fun for everyone. I won't go into detail on each of these attempts, but realize that in the end, our goal was to strike a balance between adjusting the game based on what we learned and keeping to a schedule. (More on that later.)

Our first fix created slots divided into five categories: offensive, defensive, control, movement and "wild card". A player could choose any power they wanted with a wild card. Each origin included a fixed number of each category; heroes could not get any more of a particular category than their origin allowed. As a person advanced, power slots would open up, designated as one of the five categories. (This also introduced the concept of levels.) The slots that opened depended entirely on a hero's origin. So a mutant might have more offensive powers, a magic origin more control powers, etc.



Players still had access to lots of powers. In some ways, this system was effectively no more restrictive than the first. A player could choose either a ranged or a melee power plus a control power. Clearly, this still allowed for more than the traditional MMORPG classes.

However, origins still came with a lot of consequences. And none of them were intuitive. Fantasy RPGs inherit a lot of assumptions with their genre. We all know that dwarves are tough, grouchy and tend to dislike magic of all types. Elves are peaceful, long lived, and prone to the arcane arts. So when a person drops into a fantasy MMORPG, he already knows the basics about choices of, say, race (I'll get to the character class discussion soon). Comic book hero origins, however, have absolutely no meaning attached. How does someone bitten by a radioactive insect differ from someone born with the power to read minds? Does an errant nuclear bomb create a hero any different than a hero born on a distant planet? Sure, the fiction behind the heroes differs - but their powers don't. New players would need to do a lot of reading up on each origin because they wouldn't immediately understand what that origin meant for their character. We understand what an elf is like, but we may not know what a "scientific" origin means.

We learned the hard way what many game developers have probably learned in the past; never present a player with a choice they are not prepared to make. Yes, interested players could read through the descriptions of each origin to find out about them - but how would a player know that origins were that important to begin with? When I play games, I jump right in, never reading the instruction manual. I assume that I'll figure out the game as I play. Now, if a player quickly chooses an origin, only to have it later drastically affect what his hero can be, then that player will quickly become dissatisfied. If players don't intuitively know anything about origins, then don't put too much meaning into them. It's as simple as that.

So we were in a quandary last November or so; we still hadn't created a character creation system that made sense to the new player, but also created diversity for



character classes. Dungeons & Dragons has pretty much nailed down the fantasy stereotypes - fighter, thief, cleric & mage. All fantasy MMORPGs used versions of these basic classes with great success. But comic book heroes had no such well defined classes. I couldn't turn to pen and paper games because historically, they had allowed their players to purchase whatever powers they wanted.

My first pass at comic book character classes looked something like this:

- Armored Hero - good at a little bit of everything.
- Blaster - distance attack specialist
- Brick - extremely tough in hand to hand. Superhumanly strong and invulnerable
- Cosmic Hero - the hero who has mastered the primal energies of the universe
- Detective - the stealthy hero who stays in the shadows
- Elemental - capable of using fire, ice, earth, etc. in a variety of ways.
- Flier - the hero who's sole ability was flight.
- Martial Artist - the hand to hand specialist. Better at avoiding damage than taking it.
- Shaman - terrible name, but I envisioned the hero who could do the "odd" things.
- Speedster - the super fast hero who is present in so many comic book universes
- Totem - a hero whose powers resembled that of an animal, insect or fish

The design team began mapping out what exactly each class would be capable of. We ranked each class in a number of different categories: ranged attack, defense, melee attack, mezzing, buffing teammates, etc. Our next step was then assigning possible powers to each class; players would then be able to choose from that list.

To tell you the truth, I really, really liked the system. I thought I had managed to capture the true essence of every comic book hero out there. I could slot just about any hero my imagination dreamed up and place them neatly into one of these classes.

But these classes were so restrictive with power selection that the character class would pretty much define what a hero could do from start to end. The classes allowed almost no freedom in what a player could do. It's not that this is a terrible



much one thing and one thing only - right (that's changed a bit in the new edition of D&D). A second problem was that some of the classes were inherently weaker than the others. It was a stretch to take the Flier, for example, and make him equal the Cosmic Hero. In comic books, writers make sure to tailor their stories to the character. That's something we could easily do in a solo game, but the problem is that City of Heroes is an MMORPG. We absolutely needed every player to feel as if they had the same opportunities for success and power as everyone else.

It was now the holidays, and I felt that we were back to square one. The problem remained; how do we allow players to create their own type of hero but also create a character creation system that guides them in a sensible way?

Next Volume: How we came up with the solution...

Until then,

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Was this article informative?

YES

NO

In This Article



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