



CITY OF HEROES

City of Heroes Diary, Volume 3

Lead Designer Jack Emmert continues his discussion of the revised character creation system in Cryptic's game.

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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

Origins, Levels & Classes Continued...

I left off the last designer diary with a bit of a cliffhanger. Our original game design for [City of Heroes](#) allowed virtually unlimited choices for powers, but this ran into a number of different problems. First, this system was extremely difficult to understand for a new player. A newbie could easily choose a number of powers that wouldn't be useful to him - and thus his character would be permanently 'gimped.' Second, it was extremely hard to balance all of the combinations. Lastly, the system bred cookie-cutter type characters. In other words, everyone chose the same types of powers. Despite the possibility of creating any character, players would tend towards 'uber' combinations. We tried to make small tweaks to the initial system, but no solution seemed viable as of last December.

The design team came back after the New Year armed with some new ideas, but to be honest, none had us had an idea set in stone. As it turned out, I think our open-mindedness really helped. Together, we shifted our focus from the comic book genre to the MMORPG genre. I had previously been approaching character



Heroes wasn't just a comic book hero game, it was also a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. So, we listed all of the things that MMORPG characters could do - ranged attacks, melee attacks, boost others' abilities, move faster, stealth, etc.

We then started marking out the combinations of abilities that had previously proven so problematic. For instance, heroes with Ranged attacks and Defense powers could pretty much kite at will and never feel at risk. That sort of gameplay became pretty boring very quickly. Another classic combination that we wanted to avoid was mezzing and ranged attacks. In other MMORPGs, players could simply root foes and then blast away at them. Again, not much risk and not much fun. And perhaps the most dangerous sets of combinations were any that didn't provide the player with some sort of meaningful attack. The powers of invulnerability and flight are extremely useful, but if those are the only powers you've got, it's not much fun to play.

Next, we took these very narrowly defined abilities and grouped them into larger categories. Things like rooting, mezzing and sleep were all related to controlling the behavior of the AI characters. So we dubbed that category 'Crowd Control' (to be honest, I call it now just 'control' but we didn't want to confuse it with our previous named control powers). We ended up with six basic areas: Melee Attacks, Ranged Attacks, Personal Defense, Buff/Debuff, Crowd Control and Movement abilities. At the time, we didn't quite know where we were going with this; we were just trying to get a handle on what exactly the things were that MMORPG players could do - and would want to do - in our game.

Pretty quickly, we decided that an individual hero should be able to have powers in two of those categories. A player who can do only one of those things would be hopelessly gimped ("Hey, I'm invulnerable", "Can you do anything else?", "Erm. No.") and anyone who could do three would pretty much be a tank mage. In other words, such a hero type would be so overwhelmingly powerful that everyone would choose to be that one as opposed to any other. The other down side to a tank mage is that no hero feels special. Players want to feel that they have



everything, it's impossible for any single hero to feel that he is distinctive and useful to a group.

We quickly removed Movement abilities from the list. We really didn't want to limit flying, super speed or any of the other travel powers to any single hero type. After all, just about anyone in the comic books could fly. And we had designed a lot of our game to accommodate the flying hero. We wanted to make sure that everyone could have these powers, though at the time, we weren't quite sure how movement powers would fit in.

Our first inclination was to allow players to choose whichever two categories they wanted. That concept would have kept true to our original design, in which players could be whatever they chose. But after a lot of debate, we decided against it for a couple of reasons. First, we would need to disallow certain combinations. If a player chose Ranged, we couldn't allow Defense as another possible ability set. This might not be intuitive to the new player, or even the MMORPG veteran. They have a hero set in their mind, and all of a sudden, their choice has been disallowed. Sure, we could do pop-ups with explanations and use other tricks of the trade to explain it - but it was still an issue.

Second, we wanted a slick process that got players into the game as quickly as possible, but we also didn't want to present them with choices that they might not understand. A person might not understand that Crowd Control plus Melee is a challenging combination to make work. The hero would be extremely fragile up close, despite the melee power. And though the hero could root people from afar, his melee power wouldn't allow him to do anything. But to the new player, why not choose those two categories? These sorts of issues allowed us to eliminate, or at least re-prioritize certain combinations.

The last problem, and most vexing, was the time limitation. The more options we had, the more time it would take to balance them all. There were lots of possible combinations, but there was simply no way we could do them all. Sure, Crowd



more time. We felt comfortable that we could eventually do the necessary balancing, but it would take an enormous amount of time to laboriously test each combination of categories in all possible situations. So, we had to find what the essential combinations were for the hero genre. After all, we were a comic book hero MMORPG; therefore, we should try our best to capture that essence.

So, I began thinking of heroes in comic books and on the silver screen. I thought about the types of combinations that seemed to fit at least the majority of heroes that I could imagine. They were:

Melee and Defense

Melee and Ranged

Ranged and Buff/Debuff

Crowd Control and Buff/Debuff

Then, I opened up the floor for anyone to imagine their hero - just from a background point of view. Could this rather simple system capture the heroes that the Cryptic staff had always wanted to play? We found that yup, it succeeded on that level.

We tweaked it a little bit though - we decided to break down the combinations into a primary and a secondary role. In particular, we found that melee heroes came in two particular flavors - the big, strong type that could absorb enormous amounts of damage, and the master fighter type. So, we created two combinations, one where Defense was primary, the other where Melee was primary.

Now, there are other possible combinations. For instance, one Archetype has Buff/Debuff as its primary power category and Range as its secondary - we could have easily done an Archetype that had Buff/Debuff as its primary power category and Melee as its secondary. What I did is consider it from a comic book reader's point of view - how many heroes fit into that type of combination? If there weren't many, I just shelved the combination for the time being. The great thing about MMORPGs is that there's plenty of time to open up other opportunities later.



The next step was assigning all the super powers that we had created into each of these combinations. But what I also did was restrict certain powers into certain combinations depending on their flavor. Claws, for instance, made imminent sense for the hero who had Melee as a primary role and Defense as a secondary role. The claws power was extremely offensive, befitting someone who was the "best at what they do." Each combination ended up with a set of powers that were shared with other combinations, and another set of powers that were unique to it.

I seized upon the name Archetypes to describe each of the individual combinations. The word seemed natural in a superheroic context; after all, comic book heroes are, in fact, archetypes of many different conscious and subconscious desires. But more importantly, I didn't view this method of character creation as being quite as rigid as the traditional character classes. The term wizard in other games tended not just to indicate a gameplay role, but also the specific spells and items a player could use. In our system, the player was choosing their general role, but then specifying for themselves exactly which powers they obtained. Not every Melee/Defense hero needed to have the same set of powers. Someone could have claws or super strength, or martial arts or... well, you get the idea. And the best part was that even though each of these heroes would basically be sharing the same overall role, their individual power combinations would make them stand out.

We took a look at some of the problems we had encountered and asked ourselves if the Archetypes solved them. We had five (as of yet un-named) Archetype combinations. That seemed completely tunable in a reasonable amount of time. The Archetypes would each be readily playable for any player regardless of the actual powers chosen. In other words, players would have fun with whatever they chose. They wouldn't need to read an enormous amount of material in order to pick the 'right' thing. Finally, we had avoided the dreaded 'gimp' and 'tank mage' syndromes. Each Archetype had its place in the sun; nothing was too powerful (at least conceptually) and nothing was too weak.

Now it came time to name them. Unfortunately, the super hero genre doesn't have



own terminology - which caused me a little bit of concern. I could come up with plenty of cool names for Archetypes - Crusader, Vanquisher, Champion, Protector, etc. - but unfortunately, nobody would know what they meant. Fantasy games had the advantage here; all players know what a cleric does because there've been hundreds of games where the cleric was primarily a healer and a relatively decent fighter. But how would a player know what a Crusader could do just by looking at the name? Sure, a player could read a description of it, but that isn't always player behavior. Most people want to get into the game and start playing as soon as possible. They don't want to feel forced to read a lot of text just to understand the basics.

Because of this, I decided to name the Archetypes with terms that pretty much described what they did. I avoided flashy, heroic names in favor of evocative ones.

Scrapper - a hand-to-hand specialist (Primary Power - Melee, Secondary - Defense)

Tanker - could resist damage (Primary Power - Defense, Secondary - Melee)

Blaster - does tons of damage (Primary Power - Ranged, Secondary - Melee)

Defender - helps protect other teammates (Primary Power - Buff/Debuff, Secondary - Ranged)

Controller - can affect AI behavior (Primary Power - Crowd Control, Secondary - Buff/Debuff).

Each of these Archetypes had its own "specialty" - the sorts of things it did best. And all of these Archetypes also had their drawbacks. The Tanker, Scrapper and Blaster were good in combat - but they needed the help of Defenders and Controllers to allow them to survive. The Controller had the incredible abilities of Crowd Control, but he needed the other Archetypes to help finish off the foes; he lacked any potent direct damage abilities. So, while the Controller could root a group of thugs, he couldn't take them all on by himself.

And there's the story of Archetypes. But of course, there's an important issue remaining in all of this - and that's the powers. How did we re-design them in light



Until then,

Jack "Statesman" 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