



CITY OF HEROES

City of Heroes Diary, Volume 4

The Lead Designer on the Cryptic team tells us more about the superhero character system and how it was revamped.

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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 and Classes, Part 3...

Sometime last year, I was watching a person play a super hero arcade fighting game in the comic book shop I frequent. Each hero had a number of different moves, which essentially translated into different ways of using several powers or abilities. This game mechanic had parallels that I could see in comic books. Heroes don't have tons of different powers; they tend to have a few important powers, but they use these in diverse ways. What separates a novice hero from a more experienced one was not the number of his powers, but rather the way in which the hero would use his original powers.

For instance, the arch villain Magneto once used his magnetic powers to hurl around metal. Later, Magneto learned to use the very same powers to control the iron in people's blood. In this way, Magneto could render just about anyone unconscious. In fact, I would be delighted when new writers took over the reins of a comic book so that I could see how someone else interpreted and stretched the standard abilities of a particular hero. If the writer came up with something



Day of Heroes for the future.

This represented an area where I felt our original character creation system didn't capture the essence of a comic book hero. In particular, I identified specific areas where our original design for powers and rewards could be improved. In the original design, players could enhance existing powers or purchase new ones at any time by spending experience points to do so. Not only did this mean that players could all of a sudden manifest startling new powers out of the blue, but it also meant that levels, while great indicators of overall hero power, offered no consistent rewards. The system didn't encourage a hero to focus their powers, learning to use them in new and unique ways over time, but instead promoted the creation of jack of all trade types of characters.

Early this year, when we made some changes to the design, these ideas were knocking around the back of my head. As I explained in earlier columns, we came up with Archetypes - and each one had two "roles." So I began assigning our old list of powers into six categories: Melee, Ranged, Buff/Debuff, Defense, Crowd Control and the catch all Etcetera. I broke up the old Control powers and placed their sub-powers under these categories. That was only step one.

Step two was finding how we could slide these powers into character advancement. We decided to limit each Archetype to one Primary Power and one Secondary Power that matched the roles we had assigned to them. In the case of the Scrapper, that would be, say, Claws (Melee) and Regeneration (Defense). How could we come up with a way for a player to receive something new on a regular basis? We immediately realized that there were a ton of powers that ended up in the Etcetera category (such as Flight, Teleportation, etc.). We dubbed it a Power Pool, and thought that players could, at certain levels, choose one of these powers. These were powers that occurred often in comic book heroes or were "utility" powers that weren't easily categorizable, and it seemed right that any Archetype could choose from them.



the 100 more than a couple of times - there weren't that many powers in there.

We wanted players to get more... but the question was how to do it. I remembered the idea [of heroes](#) using powers in unique ways - and described it to the Design Team. We then seized on the idea that our "powers" could in fact be categories for many "powers." So what was once our "Claws" power (a single type of melee attack) could in fact include many different uses of this power. We dubbed the categories "Power Sets" and what fell underneath were dubbed "Powers."

Step three was expanding each of these individual powers from the Power Set name. I drew from everything I had at my disposal to come up with an appropriate variety for each power: comic books, pencil and paper RPGs, and other computer games. Here's an example of what I did with the prosaically named "Claws":

- Claws Swipe - Fast claw attack. Slight damage.
- Claws Strike - Normal claw attack. Normal damage.
- Spinning Claws Attack - hand to hand attack to everyone within melee distance.
- Feint - an attack that does little damage that increases damage and chance to hit on next attack
- Slash - focused hand to hand attack, lots of endurance, lots of damage. Reduces target's defense to all attacks.
- Taunt - Challenges someone to fight
- Focus - A short-range attack.
- Evicerate - Heaviest attack. Some damage over time. Chance to do double damage
- Wave - Cone attack to everyone in front of the hero's claws.

I made sure that every Power Set had its own special selections of Powers. For instance, Power Punch is capable of things that Claws isn't, and Super Strength is capable of things that Power Punch isn't, and so forth. To further accentuate the differences between the Power Sets, I gave each a defining effect. Claws, for instance, are an extremely vicious form of attack, so villains are less likely to approach someone attacking with a Claws power. Super Strength powers tend to knock foes back a few feet - Power Punch attacks stun their foes, etc. With these



but still be different from each other. The hero with claws and the hero with Power Punch share the same role - melee combat - but each player's experience in combat will be different because of the differing powers and effects. This was a very important goal - everyone should feel that their player is unique.

Why does each power have nine sub-powers? We wanted to make sure that as players gained new powers, they had a choice. We thought that simply giving a predetermined new power was a too structured; people should be able to evolve their hero in whatever way they wish. We made a system that had these nine powers slowly opening up over time in the Primary and Secondary sets - so that whenever a player could choose a new power, there would be several possibilities open to them. While Primary and Secondary Power sets required nine powers each, we calculated that Power Pool power sets needed only four powers each.

Of course, our animator and our f/x artist both had mini heart attacks - after all, I had quintupled their workload. I had taken nearly every previous power we had and come up with nine variations for it. Now some effects and animations could be used several times over - but still, I had given them a real mountain of work.

We still had a remaining issue: how could we preserve the "tweakability" of powers under our first system? Previously, players could adjust different aspects of a power to meet their own needs. Well, we came up with a solution - and in the process - came up with an innovative new set of rewards for the MMORPG genre.

That's it for now.

Until next time,

Jack "Statesman" Emmert
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Cryptic Studios