



## CITY OF HEROES

# City of Heroes Diary, Volume 5

Lead Designer Jack Emmert fills us in on the design of the character reward system in Cryptic's superhero project.

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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

## Of Comic Book Heroes and Their Rewards

How are comic book heroes rewarded? Usually, heroes are satisfied with just their accomplishments - saving lives, defeating evil, etc. Oh, occasionally, you'll see a hero receive some sort of reward from the city/nation or be cheered by a crowd of bystanders. But by and large, being a hero is a pretty thankless profession. Superman doesn't get rich by saving the world time and time again. Spider Man can barely even hold onto a girlfriend, and he has super powers! Heck, most heroes don't even become more powerful over time. In a few rare cases, some demonstrate a cool new use of a power, but it's not like Batman has really gotten much past pummeling back alley thugs.

MMORPGs, unlike comic books, typically thrive on the reward concept. Players acquire "lewt" that makes their characters more powerful in some way. Maybe it's a magic sword that boosts damage - or a potion that makes a character invisible - or a magic wand filled with spells. Usually, players obtain these rewards as a result of defeating certain monsters or accomplishing some grand quest. There are plenty



Of them all - Dungeons and Dragons - pretty much paved the way for these sorts of treats for players. No dungeon was complete without a treasure hoard somewhere. And Dungeons and Dragons was hardly the trailblazer - Tolkien's Hobbit (with the Dragon guarding the treasure trove) pretty much set the standard in modern fantasy literature. And, if I can wax pedantic for a moment, Homer's Iliad (one of the first pieces of Western literature) portrayed a young hero, Achilles, receiving magic armor from his mother to do battle with the Trojans.

When I sat down to design [City of Heroes](#), I just couldn't see putting chests or crates in the corner for players to loot. By the same token, I just didn't like the idea of heroes rifling through the fallen, prone forms of defeated villains. It's not that I don't like these things - I do - but in a different context. Slaying the dragon and taking its treasure seems to make perfect sense, given the way the fantasy genre is constructed. The comic book hero genre does not in any way support this sort of game play.

But facts are facts. It may be the reason why nearly all RPGs include some sort of "phat lewt" somewhere is because it works. Players (including me) like to find some sort of magical item - or advanced technology if sci-fi is your thing. Those moments between interacting with the treasure chest and when the actual treasure is described feels like a little miniature Christmas. What will I get? Will it be better than what I've got? Who in my party can use it? Inevitably, the treasure falls far short of my expectations - but it whets my appetite for more. And then, I finally get my hands on that one thing that I've been fighting and struggling for! That achievement makes the time spent playing the game worth it.

My challenge was to create a satisfying reward system in [City of Heroes](#), but stay true to the vision of the comic book genre.

In my first diary, I talked about the principles City of Heroes was designed around. One of them was to make the game "fast & furious" - in other words, make combat more taut and edgy than the traditional MMORPG. Comic books are filled with "to



much like the way we reorganized our power system, I turned to traditional arcade games for inspiration. In traditional fighting games, and quasi-RPGs, players obtained "power-ups" as they completed levels or defeated foes. These power-ups weren't exactly necessary in order to accomplish a level, so you didn't need to get or use every one of them. But they really helped a lot. In a recent game I was playing, I noticed that my health was diminishing rapidly, so I turned to hunting the critters that would give me a health power-up. I was making a tactical decision in the heat of battle in order to save my hide - and that's exactly the sort of game play I wanted to create.

Power-ups don't need much explanation in a fighting game, but a true RPG demands a background or fiction for everything. Comic books again pointed the way. Heroes didn't suddenly come across a new weapon lying on the floor - or put on a bullet proof vest just in time; their recoveries were dramatic moments in the narrative. It's where the writer decided that the character would draw on their inner resources in order to overcome his circumstances. So, we named our "power-ups" after those very things and dubbed them Inspirations - to reflect these important shifts in the hero's tale. Inspirations like Dramatic Recovery would give a player hit points - Second Wind would recoup lost Endurance - Insight would allow a player to hit his foes more often.

Inspirations immediately made combat more interactive and thoughtful. Should I use my Dramatic Recovery now, or wait until I encountered a Boss? Should I use the Second Wind or give it to my team's Blaster? Admittedly, such choices diminished the RPG aspect a little bit. A comic book hero himself never ponders whether he should have an Insight now or later; it's the writer who makes those choices. I began to see the City of Heroes player as not just the actor through the guise of his avatar - but also the writer of his hero's tale. I didn't realize this at first, but this became far more apparent later.

Inspirations were terrific for moment to moment gameplay, but they didn't do much for long-term character development. The great thing about fantasy MMORPGs is that a player earns special items over time. They begin to flesh out



demon-slaying sword from the Arch Lich in the lost dungeon of the vampire Lords?" The gaining of the item helps build the story for the player - and makes each character unique. Not everyone gains the same items in the same way at the same time. "How did you manage to sneak past the Arch Lich's guards? I used an invisibility cloak." And, of course, magical items such as armor, shields and weapons have a wonderful tangible quality. They're "actual" things - they aren't intangible abstracts like experience points or levels - magic items are tangible (at least virtually tangible).

Certainly, we could've allowed heroes to loot their foes and gain use of their weapons. And we could have had gun stores all over the City of Heroes so that players could sell back the things they didn't want and buy the things they did. And that would've worked great - if the game had been the City of Guns. Or the City of Police. Or something like that.

But with a comic book hero game, I knew that not everyone would be trying to get the latest gadget or item. Some players would want to remain true to their character and his powers. Not every hero uses gadgets. Not every hero has magical artifacts. I wanted to make sure our "items" would fit into the entire category of heroes.

Abstractly, I considered that the best items make a given character better at the things he does. In other words, a wanted item makes the magic user a better spell caster - the thief better at picking locks, etc. If an item doesn't help a player's character, the player will quickly discard or trade it for something else. In the City of Heroes, players don't have body slots or inventories at all, because heroes typically don't wear armor or carry loot with them. But every hero does have powers. And even though two heroes could have the same basic powers, no two heroes are exactly the same. This eventually led to the idea of Specializations, which we later renamed Enhancements.

Each power would come with an "inventory" of slots. The special items would be



damage, increase the accuracy, decrease the endurance cost, etc. There were dozens of different power attributes that could be boosted, so we certainly didn't lack versatility. We initially dubbed these boosts Specializations because it allowed a player to specialize his power in particular areas. I wasn't quite satisfied, however, with how they turned out. Specializations seemed too bland to be interesting. Sure, a "Range +10" was useful in the game, but not aesthetically pleasing. Even worse, the Specializations didn't really help flavor a character or build a story. I wanted our rewards to evoke the epic struggles in earning them and to allow the player to weave a tale about his character.

I took a look once more at parallels in the comic book universe. Heroes there used gadgets, inventions, magic artifacts, and other devices to boost their formidable capabilities. In many cases, these were things that heroes used, but didn't rely upon. Also, the type of device tended to be related to the origin of the hero. So mutants didn't usually come anywhere near gadgets, while athletes turned vigilantes were quite enamored with gadgets. People in metal suits and those with scientific backgrounds loved inventing things to help them save the day, but you didn't see magicians worry themselves with such things. Magical types tended to use relics and artifacts; the most arcane heroes evoked the names of other dimensional beings.

So, I reorganized the Specializations into 10 different types, which I renamed Enhancements: Gadgets, Inventions, Relics, Secondary Mutations, and so on. (See [Rewards](#) for more detail.) Each origin in our game was given the ability to use three types of Enhancements that made sense. For instance, the Technology hero could utilize Cybernetics, Gadgets and Inventions. Some Enhancement types could be used by only a single origin - in our example, only the Technology origin could equip a Cybernetics Enhancement. Other Enhancements could be used by two origin types.

Immediately, I was struck with a discontinuity - did it make sense to "earn" an Accident (like a radioactive insect bite)? Or a Secondary Mutation? Comic book heroes certainly don't discuss amongst each other their Genetic Alterations and





inspirations. In the City of Heroes, the player is indeed a hero - but he's also a storyteller. The Enhancements empower the player to create the story of his hero's growth - so he doesn't earn an accident - it happens to him in the course of his adventure. "Dogfight was battling against those 5th Column vampires and I ended up getting bombarded by Beta Waves. Strangely, Dogfight wasn't hurt, but his Power Punches became more powerful."

Every MMORPG, heck every RPG, wants to tell a story. Developers hem and haw over it - and players demand it. Enhancements were designed to help achieve that very goal by allowing players to create the story themselves.

That's it for now. See you in Paragon City.

**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