

## Building a Better Hero, Volume 2 Version 1.2

### Contact Information & Disclaimers:

This unofficial resource was created for use with the Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game™ SAGA Rules. While every effort has been made to make these statistics as accurate as possible, the statistics contained herein are unofficial and represent only one man's opinion on the characters and their capabilities. While the game is currently out of print, I do encourage you to make every effort to locate and utilize any official materials that you can. For the most part, they are first-rate materials.

I really appreciate any user feedback. If you noticed any errors, or have questions or comments about these statistics, please let me know by sending a clearly labeled (i.e. - won't be mistaken for Spam) e-mail to: [MSHAGLibrarian@wmconnect.com](mailto:MSHAGLibrarian@wmconnect.com).

*Disclaimer 1:* I have no official connection with TSR, Wizards of the Coast, Hasbro, Marvel Comics, or any other company or entity that owns the intellectual property rights to the characters or game mechanics. No connection – either expressed or implied – is intended.

*Disclaimer 2:* The Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game™ SAGA Rules is Copyright © and Trademark™ TSR, Property of Wizards of the Coast, a Hasbro Company. No official or copyrighted materials relating to the Marvel SAGA game are contained within this document.

*Disclaimer 3:* Characters, Character Names, and the distinct likenesses thereof are Copyright © and Trademark™ their respective owners and are used without permission.

*For more information and game materials, please see the Marvel Superheroes Yahoo Group (<http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/mshag/>) or my website (<http://hl.ripway.com/mshaglibrary/index.html>).*

### Summary & Description:

This is the second in a series of documents detailing important aspects of character creation for the Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game, SAGA rules. This article includes character theory and general hints and tips that are useful for any hero, character, or villain, regardless of type. This article is based upon the idea that you are using the optional point-based creation house rules, but the theory can be applied to the official card-based creation system, as well. This article may sound, at times, like a paper on comic-writing theory, but that is essentially what good role-playing is: telling a story. So role-playing a superhero adventure should be very much like writing the same.

One thing to keep in mind at all times when creating characters or playing the game is that you shouldn't reduce your characters to a bunch of numbers on a piece of paper. While I discuss stats a great deal during this and other papers, this is only because your characters are your own. I can't really tell you anything about their personalities because I don't know what they are. I will compose a paper on personality later in this series, but for now we're just dealing with the universal data. While some villains may be megalomaniacs, and some may just want personal wealth, and still others just want to settle a grudge, all of them have a score in strength, agility, intellect, willpower, and edge – even if that score is 0. That's why I am concentrating on stats in these early papers even as I tell you not to.

### **Character Abilities**

First, let's take a look at the Character Abilities and just what they mean to you (and more importantly, your hero).

#### **Strength**

Strength may be the single-most important attribute in the game. Strength actions deal with physical strength, endurance, and toughness. It certainly isn't the only stat to worry about, but it determines your defense against physical attacks, so it would behoove anyone to improve this score. Also, for the vast majority of heroes, most attacks will be based upon the Strength Ability. This is not to mention all the other miscellaneous actions you'll do during an adventure: climbing walls, breaking down doors, and wrecking the villain's cleverly constructed deathtrap (among others) are all fairly common Strength-based actions.

If your hero is part of a team, he'll have a teammate to pick up the slack, but that teammate may not always be around, and if you're a solo hero, you won't have a teammate at all. Think it over: what type of hero is he and how often will he have to use that strength stat? The more often he'll use it, the higher he will want it to be, since a higher score automatically means a greater chance of success, no matter the difficulty rating.

#### **Agility**

Agility is also very important, sometimes more so than Strength if playing a finesse character. Agility actions deal with dexterity, flexibility, coordination, and deftness of motion. Agility lets you dodge attacks completely, so it's just as good as being tough when it comes to being attacked. With the right skills, a player can also attack with Agility (and more than once per round) so that's also something to consider. There will be numerous Agility actions aside from dodging, as well. Expect to see throwing things, firing weapons, running, and sneaking around to occur regularly during most campaigns.

Again, you'll want to consider your hero's situation regarding teams or solo work when deciding this stat. Be sure that if you are the team's sneaky person, to leave the big, clunky, noise-making teammates behind when going stealthy. You're only as quiet as your loudest member, after all.

#### **Intellect**

Intellect is possibly the game's least important stat, though it is the one I prize most

highly. Intellect actions have to do with mental acuity, logic, and quickness of thought. Your hero doesn't need to be a rocket scientist to thrive in the game (unless he really is a rocket scientist, that is). Most Narrators aren't too picky about the Intellect stat, and even those who are (like me) are usually generous with the benefit of doubt. Intellect is used for determining declaration order in Hero vs. Hero combat, but not much else. Intellect actions are less frequent than the physical actions, but still fairly common. Such actions include cracking codes, solving riddles, deciphering clues, and similar noodle-bending puzzlers.

As always, you'll want to consider your teammate situation with this stat. Unless you're the team's brain, you can skimp on this stat fairly safely. Do remember, though, that while this stat may not be much on its own, it does open up new avenues for using the stats you do have. Perhaps the only thing better than having a Strength score of 20 is knowing how to really use it.

### **Willpower**

Willpower is important, too. It's probably the second-most important stat, behind whichever of Strength or Agility is your primary statistic. Willpower actions have to do with mental toughness, stubbornness, and observation. Willpower actions may not be very frequent, but when they occur, they are usually important. A successful Willpower action can mean the difference between shattering your opponent's confidence and falling asleep on the job. It can mean the difference between noticing the important clue and blundering blindly along. Willpower also acts as defense instead of Strength for most psionic and stunning attacks. It can also boost the power of psionic heroes, and it is necessary for magicians to have a high Willpower score so that they can advance their magic score.

As with Strength, everyone can benefit from more Willpower. Everyone will want a solid score, regardless of position on the team (or if going solo) but you won't need a super-high score unless you are a Psionic or a Mage.

## **Character Concepts**

There are two prevailing theories for your character concept. You'll have to decide which of these two you're going to subscribe to and then go on from there. As I mention a bit later, this decision can have as much to do with your Narrator's style of play as it does your own.

### **1a) Do One Thing and Do It Well.**

This theory states that you have "primary" characteristics and "secondary" characteristics. This tends to lead to more focused, powerful heroes, but they can become cliché. For instance, since intelligence isn't too important to a bruiser type, you tend to have a super high Strength score, and a really low Intellect score. So what you end up with are dozens of mindless, grind-you-to-paste brawlers. Which is not necessarily bad, but it's something you'll have to think hard about in the more character-oriented campaigns. Especially if your Narrator is the type that makes you stick to the player's stats when deciding what kind of plans he can come up with (I am). Your dumb-as-a-box-of-rocks strongman probably won't come up with any battle plan that's much more involved than "Hit him until he falls down." So if you have "Knock the henchman into that support beam, which

will cave in the roof, disabling the doomsday machine and sealing off the villain's escape," as your character's proposed action, I'm saying "no way" before you even get a chance to try. Actions that involved are reserved for people who can speak in complete sentences.

### **1b) Cover Your Bases.**

This theory states that there are no unimportant statistics, regardless of hero type. This tends to lead to more balanced, diluted statistics, but more interesting characters. Maybe your strongman can't crush the villain's titanium armor into dust, but he can put a good dent in it. And if that fails, he could possibly deduce the armor's one weakness and shut it down, so that's a good back-up plan. Another advantage to this type of character is the "support beam" scenario above. Your hero may be able to accomplish things in ways that a more focused character cannot. Of course, there is a downside, as well. If the Hulk punches your hero in the face, it'll hurt. A lot. And there will be bleeding. Oh yes, lots and lots of bleeding.

### **2) Pick a Personality**

Now that you know the general direction you're going in, it's time to make a road map. No stat can tell you half as much about your hero as his personality does, but perhaps you could tie the two in together. As I mentioned in Volume 1, you can look to your stats for your hero's personality, or you could pick the stats based upon that personality. What you are looking for is the cause and effect relationship between the hero's stats and his personality. How does he react to the stats? That's what you should ask yourself over and over. Does his high Strength make him wild and brutal, secure in his feeling of virtual invulnerability? Or is he gentle, afraid that his massive muscles might inadvertently hurt someone? When deciding about this (one of literally hundreds of hero conundrums) look to all aspects of the stats, not just intensities. Hindrances and limits can have just as big an effect on a hero's personality. The Monstrous hindrance may not play a huge part in the Thing's daily life, because as a known hero of the popular Fantastic Four, most people believe in his basic goodness. But an unknown or mistrusted hero may have a much harder time with the same hindrance. People may be less willing to believe that the collateral damage was accidental and not part of a larger plan for destruction. Other heroes may mistake him for a villain - or think he was purposely trying to scare innocent citizens - and attack him. Such ramifications are apt to make a monstrous hero a touch on the cautious side. A hero saddled with the Overconfident hindrance, however, will likely be loud, arrogant and headstrong to the point of being obnoxious. He'll make silly mistakes because of it, because that's what the Hindrance is designed to do. So, again, look to all the stats to get ideas, not just the basics.

### **3) Make a History**

You may wish to make up a history for your hero. This really depends on how much time and effort you want to put into your hero. Anything that enriches the experience for you is probably worth the effort you put into it. Let's say, for example, your hero has a catch phrase (a la Spidey's "With Great Power..."). Now, we all know that Spidey got his phrase from his dear old Uncle Ben. But where did the Thing get "It's Clobberin' Time"? Where did the Human Torch get "Flame On! "? It may never come up, and most heroes

won't want or need to know where your hero's phrase came from, but *your hero* should know it. It's these kind of little details – though they really seem insignificant at first – that really set your hero apart and make him seem more realistic. So make it a point to know your hero the way that you know your best friend.

You should, at the very least, make up a story for how your hero got his powers and how he came to be a hero, even one so mundane as "He hit puberty, went to Xavier's School, and joined the X-Men to fight for mutant rights." This is a story you will probably be telling quite a bit, so don't feel bad about spending the time to make it a good one. Heroes like to get to know each other; it makes the hero business a lot easier to handle when you know that there are others just like you fighting at your side (why you all chose to wear brightly-colored pajamas while doing it would be another matter entirely).

Whatever depth of detail you made, make sure that your hero's history and his personality coincide. A terminally happy hero probably didn't watch helplessly as his family died painfully in a fire. Maybe someone somewhere decided "Life sucks, I think I'll be happy about it." but those people usually don't become heroes, as far as I know. Those people are beaten to death by the jaded masses that enjoy wallowing in self-pity. Heroes aren't just out to bash spandex-clad criminals, they are also fighters for change. Whatever it is, there is some flaw in the system that they do not like, and are trying to fix. In short, there may be *rebels* without a cause, but *heroes* have reasons: know yours.

#### **4) Character Flaws are Your Friends.**

Call it a character flaw, a quirk, or a faux pas; whatever word you use, those funny little foibles are what make the man. Character flaws are the hooks that make them seem so much more (and more than) human. Think about what kinds of character flaws make your favorite heroes more realistic. Accents, addictions, catch phrases, signature moves, and the like are all good characterizations you can utilize. Wolverine smokes cigars, Gambit prefers cigarettes, but both like tobacco. Iron Man likes his alcohol, and Dracula is fond of the taste of blood, but both are slaves to the drink. Colossus likes his girls easy, often, and underage, but Captain America acts with nobility (often to his own detriment) especially with the ladies. What would Gambit be without his mystique? What would Spider-Man be without his sarcasm? What would Dr. Doom be without his cosmic-level arrogance? Well, for you practical jokers out there, they probably would be a little less annoying (both to readers and to their worlds), but they would also be less interesting. Remember that whatever emotion they invoke, they are invoking a reaction because you care about them one way or the other.

Duality is also a very useful tool in Superhero fiction, so don't be afraid to play around on both sides of the hero's identity. Maybe a person is shy, timid, and unassuming in his civilian life, but sarcastic, energetic, and in-your-face as a costumed hero. No one notices Peter Parker, but – love or hate – everyone knows about Spider-Man. Maybe your hero has the same personality in costume and out, but other people react differently to him because of the costume. People love Kitty Pryde because she's a quiet and thoughtful girl, but Shadowcat evokes fear and hatred among people simply because she's a known mutant. So whatever little twist you give your hero to make him more (or less) likable, remember that realism and conflict (with self and others) are the keys to interesting characters.

### **5) Check Your God-Complex at the Door**

This is pretty much a warning to everyone that it is much more fun for everyone to fight within your own weight class. You see, very early comics (while monetarily valuable) weren't much fun to read. Superman would always beat the bad guy because he was, well, Superman. He was always portrayed as so much more than human that he could do anything easily. While it may be fun to think of heroes in that way, the more worthwhile heroes are always those who struggle to get the victory (and who don't always get it).

A hero fighting down into a lower weight class would be sort of like playing your favorite video game with the Invincibility cheat code on: you're just going through the motions. There is no danger, no challenge, and as a result, not much fun, and nobody wants that in a comic. So, while it is sometimes fun to sit around thinking about how easily the Silver Surfer can kick the ass of pretty much anyone, it's not much fun to read about it, and even less fun to play. If you're the Silver Surfer, expect to go up against the likes of Thanos, Tyrax, Nova, Tyrant, and Ego the Living Planet. Sure, you could clean the nameless thugs out of the Bronx in 0.2 seconds and without really trying hard, but then what would Daredevil do with all his free time?

If you ask any Superman fan what the most memorable battle in Supes' long history, just about every one will tell you that it was his death at the hands of Doomsday. Most will also tell you that the rematch in Hunter/Prey sucked big time. This is in large part due to the villain – which I'll get into later: see section 7) Make Good Friends (& Foes) – but mostly because people want their heroes to be mortal. It's the danger that makes it exciting. The risk of death is what sets aside the hero from the politician. While the talkers are talking about doing something, the hero is on the front lines fighting for it. Heroes represent a sort of selfless nobility that seems lacking from our modern world. Heroes don't just believe in a cause. They sweat for it, they bleed for it, and sometimes they die for it, because that is what it means to be a hero.

### **6) Get a Partner in (Fighting) Crime (or lots of them)**

Be it a sidekick, a duo, or a team, heroes are much more effective when they work together. Certainly, solo heroes have their place, and there are tons of them, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a solo hero who doesn't team up with others from time to time. Spider-Man, one of Marvel's flagship solo heroes, has made his living fighting all by his lonesome, but there have been times when even he has teamed up with others to accomplish something he couldn't do alone. From the X-Men to the Avengers to the Fantastic Four, Spidey has run with pretty much the whole pack of hero teams, and most of them more than once. (Spider-Man is an honorary member of both the Avengers and the Fantastic Four.)

At times when the villains are teaming up (like in Maximum Carnage) the heroes have little choice but to band against them. Sometimes, there are threats so massive that whole teams unite to form a small army (such as when the X-Men and Avengers teamed up to take on Genosha in the Bloodties storyline). Heck, even the Silver Surfer has teamed up to get help before (with the Fantastic Four or War Machine and Thunderstrike, just to name a few). So whether your hero is a member of an equal team (like the Avengers) or the pupil of a mentor (like the X-Men) teamwork can overcome many challenges that could not be done otherwise.

But heroes aren't the only ones with teams. Aside from all the straightforward teams of villains working together from the Serpent Society to the Masters of Evil, there are other examples of solo villains turning to teamwork to defeat ever better (and more social) heroes. Many formerly solo villains have come together to form teams, such as the mutual foes of Spider-Man that formed the Sinister Six. Even traditionally solo villains often keep a private army of underlings around, some of them super-powered, some of them human. For instance, The Kingpin of Crime has his own criminal syndicate, Mister Sinister has the Marauders and the Nasty Boys, Apocalypse has the Four Horseman, Magneto has the Acolytes (and had the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants before that), and Dr. Doom has the whole nation of Latveria. So whoever you are, everyone needs a friend to watch your back (or an underling to take the fall for you).

Oh, and teams aren't the only game in town, either, no sir. The Dynamic Duos of herodom are often just as effective as the larger teams, if a little less common. Cap had Bucky, Batman had Robin, and Galactus had the Silver Surfer. And while most of them eventually broke up and led solo careers of their own, all of them became more together than they ever could have been alone. But not all joint ventures are of the knight and squire variety. Luke Cage and Iron Fist stood as equal partners, as did Cloak & Dagger, so your hero doesn't have to play toady to some other hero, nor does he have to find a student of his own. Just having a good friend is enough.

### 7) Make Good Friends (& Foes)

Okay, so everyone can see the logic of having good friends, but why would one want good foes? Well, it's quite simple, really. Nothing sets a hero apart like a quality enemy, which is a good thing, as most heroes collect villains like little boys collect baseball cards. A hero can be measured as much by whom it is he angers as by who he befriends. No battle is more exciting than a victory over your arch-nemesis, and none more frustrating than a loss to the same. It's this kind of rivalry that truly breeds legends. After all, who can forget the greatest grudge-matches in comic-book history? Wolverine is such an interesting character to so many people because of his quality villains. His archenemies include Omega Red, Sabretooth, and Lady Deathstrike, all of which are the polar opposite of Wolverine in some manner. Spider-Man follows the same formula, with villains like Venom, Carnage, Electro, the Green Goblin, the Hobgoblin, and Doc Ock just to name a few. A hero's Rogues Gallery should read like the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list. Any old pansy can beat average thugs; being proud of that is like bragging about beating up the Vienna Boys Choir -- who couldn't do that with a baseball bat and half an hour? But taking on the heavy-hitters of the criminal world -- the baddest of the bad? That takes guts, determination, and a certain crazy charm that you just have to admire. I mean, come on, these guys don't just fight these particular villains because they have to, or because it's their duty as a hero. No, they fight them because they *want* to, they *enjoy* it; sometimes they even *get off* on it. That kind of fanaticism is kind of endearing, especially to those who harbor no love for the villain.

So what makes a villain a *good* villain (so to speak)? For starters, he is whatever the hero *is not*, either physically, mentally, or both. In the case of Magneto and Professor Xavier, this is a bit more subtle than most cases, but it is there, nonetheless. Magneto is physically mighty, while Professor X is weak of body (but has some kick-ass mental abilities). Professor X is peaceful, whereas Magneto is aggressive. Professor X wants to

help mutants coexist, while Magneto wants to help mutants rule. But as important as that aspect is, the villain is also partly what the hero *is*. Similarities are as frightening as differences, and sometimes more so. Both wish to help end mutant oppression. Both are masters of their respective powers (mental and magnetic). Both are fighting for change (towards what each one views as a better world). Plugging Wolverine and Sabretooth into that equation, you see that both are strong, agile, and cunning fighters who use devastating claw attacks. Yet Sabretooth is a cold-blooded killer who enjoys slaughter for the 'sport' of it, while Wolverine sometimes must kill to get the job done, however much he will feel remorse afterwards.

Another thing to consider about the villain is his power level. Just how powerful is a good villain? Well, to be perfectly honest that depends on the setting. To make a few sweeping and somewhat unfair generalizations, DC tends to favor a "slightly weaker than the hero" approach while Marvel takes the opposite "slightly stronger than the hero" approach, and the various independent labels vary widely. I, myself, am partial to the "slightly stronger" point of view, so that is what I will recommend. This method gives many advantages (and not a few disadvantages) over the other methods. For one, your hero will have to struggle more to win (remember that conflict = interest) because he will always be at a disadvantage. For another, villains rarely hold back, so they will seem more powerful by default, merely because they are more destructive. This ties in with the "danger" aspect I mentioned in section 5) *Check Your God-Complex at the Door*. This also ties into the "challenge" issue I mentioned later in that same section. What danger does a hero face in fighting lesser villains? "The bad guy might get lucky"? That may be true, but it's hardly riveting storytelling. Heroes should *earn* their victories. Weaker villains should be used sparingly and/or as momentary distractions or even for comic relief (like in the 1999-2000 Gambit series). If so, make sure it is obvious. Gambit is toying with his weaker opponents in that series and that makes it more interesting than, for instance, when he is fighting a horde of Brood in various story arcs. (If you hadn't noticed, I'm not fond of "swarming" heroes with loads of crappy villains, either.) So to be perfectly exact, a villain should be about 100-133% as strong as his nemesis hero, or in the case of a solo villain facing a team about as strong as the two or three strongest members of the team. *Note that these are figurative scores, not literal. The SAGA 20-point scale is not a numerically equal scale; it is weighted to be top-heavy. A hero with a 10 strength can bench press a whole heck of a lot more than double his 5 strength counterpart. The gap between a 10 and a 15 is even larger, a hero with Strength 15 being capable of bench-pressing around 100 times the weight of the Strength 10, even though the point differential (5) is the same. Using literal scores a villain will have a 1-2 point differential for a solo hero, and a 3-5 point differential for a team. Alternately, an advantage of 1 in Edge should work most of the time.*

As important as knowing what does work is knowing what *doesn't* work. Superman – to pick on my poor red-and-blue-clad friend – started out with a really poor Rogues Gallery and it didn't get much better with age. Many of his enemies are normal humans, albeit evil geniuses. But what is an evil genius compared to a righteous super-genius with planet-crushing might? Well, he's fresh meat for the justice system is what he is. Lex Luthor? The Toymaker? You've got to be kidding me. Many of his other villains were no better, despite being super-powered. Lobo is strong and evil, but not too bright: no trouble outwitting him. The Warworlders are evil and cunning, but no match for his

strength: another no-contest. In fact, for the most part Supes didn't see a decent match-up (unless he was going Hero vs. Hero) until he fought – and died – at the hands of Doomsday.