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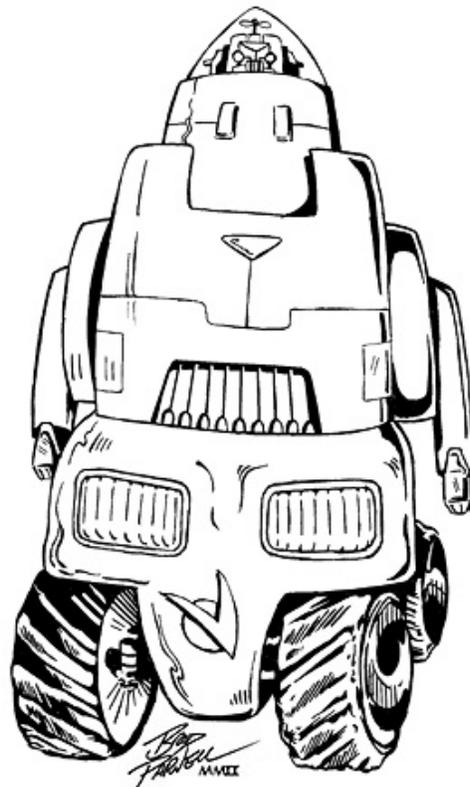
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DIGITAL HERO

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EDITOR'S NOTE

With ten issues per year, that means that twice a year, *Digital Hero* skips a month. With the holidays coming up, we won't be publishing again until February. In the meantime, Merry Christmas!

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Ninja Hero in the House by Michael Surbrook

When the original version of *Ninja Hero* was released, it quickly came to be regarded as one of the best supplements ever written for the *HERO System*. *The Ultimate Martial Artist* followed in its footsteps, updating and expanding on the original material, while also presenting new concepts. To boot, the books were written by two of the biggest names in the realm of Hero authors: Aaron Allston and Steve Long. How do you top that?

The answer? You don't.

When I initially conceived of the idea that eventually evolved into the new edition of *Ninja Hero*, I knew exactly what I wanted to discuss. I wanted to create a book that covered the material both *Ninja Hero* and *The Ultimate Martial Artist* missed – the realm of “wild” martial arts. At the time the original *Ninja Hero* was written, there was minimal awareness of the wild world of Hong Kong cinema in America, and the *anime* craze was still in its infancy. Since then, however, both forms of media have become readily accessible to the average viewer (and gamer), leading to an interest in how to adapt the things seen in many Hong Kong action films (and Japanese *anime*) for use in any number of roleplaying games.

My aim was to create a book that delved into the world of Hong Kong *wuxia* films, Japanese *anime* and *manga*, and even video games, and presented the results for *HERO System* gamers to use and adapt for their campaigns. Titling the work *Wuxia Hero*, I set to work.

Initially the book was to be published by Gold Rush Games, but that plan fell through. I thought about submitting it to Hero Games, but they had just been sold (to DOJ, of course), and I wasn't sure DOJ would want such a manuscript. Then all my questions and worries were solved in one fell swoop when *HERO System* Line Developer Steve Long asked if I'd like to adapt *Wuxia Hero* into a revised version of *Ninja Hero*. How could I say no?

The biggest goal for *Ninja Hero* was to present the world of martial arts action. The revised version of *The Ultimate Martial Artist* covered the real world martial arts pretty well, but I wanted to look at the more cinematic side of the genre – everything from the kung fu comedy of Jackie Chan, in which Jackie performs stunts that defy the limits of human ability, to *manga* such as *Dragonball* where characters are known to demolish mountains in the course of a fight.

The first step was to watch lots and lots of martial arts movies (a really tough task, let me tell you). As I watched, I took notes, looking for common elements and effects. Then I asked the readers (such as you, for example) what they wanted to see (most people said “ninja” for some reason). Then came putting it all together.

Assembling *Ninja Hero* meant following Steve's outline, cutting up *Wuxia Hero* as needed, and writing new material to fill in the blanks. The most important part (in my opinion anyway) was the section on character design and construction, and that's the part of the book I think really shines. To truly illustrate what makes the martial arts action genre special, I go through many of the game elements in the *HERO System* sourcebook and discuss how you can adapt them for use in a martial arts action campaign. There are also dozens of sample powers in the chapter, illustrating everything from Aid (“Drunken Boxing”) to the Double Knockback Advantage (“Twin Palm Strike”). In between, GMs and players will find Armor Shredding Strikes, *Ch'i* Fireballs, Grass Running Stances, and Supreme Warrior Auras.

When it came time to discuss the martial arts genre itself, I decided to divide the martial arts genre down into five subgenres: Realistic (the “real world”); Cinematic (e.g., martial arts as depicted by Hollywood); *Wuxia* (e.g., most Hong Kong martial arts cinema); Video Game; and Anime. I use these terms to help define different power levels, styles of play, and even acceptable powers and abilities. To top it off, there is a sample campaign seed given for each campaign type.

I also use the five campaign types as a way to frame the *Sourcebook* chapter. Since many people asked for ninja, I come through with five that are fully fleshed-out (one for each subgenre) and six “generic” ninja write-ups adaptable to many campaigns. The same goes for the rest of the NPCs, of which there are at least two for each campaign type – one hero and one villain. I even go so far as to link various characters together by placing them all in the same general time period. For example, the *Wuxia* hero and villain are opponents of each other, and the *Wuxia* villain hires and uses the *Wuxia* ninja. This provides some internal consistency, and allows me to contrast different characters (and provide some built-in GM hooks and ideas).

Of course, all this talk of martial arts action, Hong Kong cinema, and Japanese *anime* doesn't do much good if the reader doesn't know what to look for, so the book wraps up with an extensive listing of source material. I present long lists of American, Hong Kong, and Japanese martial arts films, *anime* and *manga*, video games, books, and even other roleplaying games.

All in all, I feel that the new *Ninja Hero* will be a worthy successor to the original, and *HERO System* gamers will find it a useful supplement for not just martial arts action, but hopefully for all genres.

A NEW HERO?

Backdraft stepped out of the MegaGeneTech building, unceremoniously dragging the unconscious body of the villain Nexus along with him. Backdraft's sandy brown hair wafted in the breeze as he stopped at the sidewalk and glanced both directions. Small sparks of flames danced playfully down his letterman-style jacket and Backdraft breathed heavily, as if from heavy exertion. Not surprisingly, since Nexus' portal-jumping abilities made him a tough cookie to crack indeed.

"Nice catch there, stud-puppy," came a pleasant, feminine voice from out of nowhere. Backdraft, startled, spun and looked everywhere before noticing a young girl crouched atop a nearby newspaper machine. She appeared in her early- to mid-teens and her red hair, spackled with platinum highlights, made her seem exotically beautiful for a young girl.

"Vixen," Backdraft growled, subconsciously sparking a flame around his now clenching fist.



Meriquai Falls: Against the Iconics

by Dale Robbins

Zen And the Art of Coping with Iconics

Welcome to the fourth installment in a series that details the city of Meriquai Falls. In this issue, we will look not at the city or setting in and of itself, but at an important aspect of the setting that can be potentially useful and damaging at the same time... iconic characters. Amethyst, Crimson-Hawk, Jade Phoenix, Masquerade, Reverb, and Vixen were briefly detailed in "Meriquai Falls" (*Digital Hero #2*). Crimson-Hawk and various other iconic characters have been used extensively in flavor text in the other *Meriquai Falls* articles. And they are not the only iconic characters ever created for a campaign setting. Is there *Meriquai Falls* beyond Crimson-Hawk?

You bet there is! Read on, Hero-philes, for this article benefits any campaign setting, not just *Meriquai Falls*.

What are Iconic Characters?

Crimson-Hawk gazed across the room. It was filled with reporters who were wide-eyed with wonder. Not even two months before, the city of Meriquai Falls had never seen a superhero more powerful than the utility-belt-toting Bloodshadow or the truck-driving, gun-wielding Shotgun Rider. Now, standing before the gathered reporters were six young superheroes who could give the Champions in Millennium City a run for their money.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press," Crimson-Hawk began. "You see gathered before you a team of heroes whose intentions are pure and just. The mentalist Amethyst, the metamorph Masquerade, the mecha pilot Reverb, the martial artist Jade Phoenix, and the acrobat Vixen all join me in forming what will assuredly be the last line of defense for Meriquai Falls. I now present to you Meriquai Falls' new champions... The Omega Legion!"

Iconic characters, simply put, are the heroic characters pregenerated for a campaign setting. In the roleplaying industry today, every campaign setting seems to have them. In the *Champions Universe* setting, there are The Champions themselves. In the *Western Shores* setting for *Fantasy Hero*, there are the Flashing Blades. In the *Meriquai Falls* setting, there is The Omega Legion. Even a certain very popular fantasy roleplaying setting cannot be mentioned without conjuring images of a dual-sword-

wielding dark elf, a grizzled old sage, and seven beautiful eldritch sisters.

Iconic characters have their pros and cons. On the plus side, they serve as examples of what heroes can be in the campaign setting. Defender, Ironclad, and Witchcraft, for instance, all set good examples of the power levels and motivations that are acceptable in the *Champions Universe*. If built properly, iconic characters can also provide new players with a character to play without much fuss. If you've got a new player joining your *Meriquai Falls* campaign, you can simply toss her Amethyst's or Masquerade's character sheet for a session, to give the player a feel of what the HERO System is like.

However, iconic characters can have a downside. They can steal the spotlight. In the most annoying, irritating, player-wrath-invoking way possible. If iconic characters are really popular (such as Defender or Sapphire in the *Champions Universe* setting) or really powerful (such as Vengeance in the *Meriquai Falls* setting), GMs might be tempted to have them appear in as many game sessions as possible. In doing so, the iconic character may inadvertently steal the spotlight from the Player Characters. And this is never a good thing.

To help cope with the use of iconic characters, this article offers a few suggestions.

The Player Characters are Central

Zack smiled as his players shuffled through their character sheets. The battle against Count Dredmaus had begun. Ren was scooping together his six-sided dice for his martial artist First Strike's "Cut The Grass" attack while Nash was considering the options his mentalist hero Mindstab had for combat. Lorelei pondered what her energy blaster Feedback could do, while Erik flexed as if he were his brick hero, Landwalk.

As the combat got under way, Zack grinned. This was going to be so cool! "Guys, as Count Dredmaus starts pummeling you all within an inch of your lives, you hear a voice call from above you. 'Don't worry, my friends! I'm here to save you!' As you look up, you see the heroic figure of Crimson-Hawk!"

"What?" Lorelei asked, exasperated.

"Not again," Erik groaned, burying his face in his arms.