

above the earth

a game about capes and miracles
from innocence games

by bryant durrell

a hundred six siders

*“You have a hundred six siders; when you run out,
you run out.”*

That’s the game, right there. Everything else is just elaboration on that single rule. Your superhero starts the adventure with a whole bunch of energy, and spends it carefully (or not) during the course of the day. The only thing that really matters, mechanically, are the numbers on the dice. The special effects – the things your superhero does with his or her powers – are totally up to you.

If you’re playing a flying superhero who can shoot fire from her hands, and you run into a situation that requires her to heat up a bunch of guns wielded by low-life thugs, you can do that. You don’t have to worry about putting that specific effect on her character sheet. If you want to use the flame to create an updraft which keeps a kitten from falling to its death, that’s cool too. The only limitation is the social pressure imposed by the GM and the other players.

So how do these dice work? Glad you asked. Let’s kick it off with an example of play.

Example of Play

Our GM is Eddie; he’s running a game for Hunter, Molly, and John. Hunter is playing a big burly Wolverine rip-off named Buzzsaw; Molly is playing a psionic detective who goes by Snapshot; and John is playing a guy named Titanium who can project force fields. As a team, they call themselves The Moderns.

We’re just starting out, so all of them have the full complement of a hundred six-sided dice. Eddie’s setting the scene.

Scene One

Eddie: “OK. You’ve gotten a call from your police contact, Sgt. Berkowitz. He’s concerned that there’s going to be an attempt to steal this gizmo from the Providence University Paranormal Research Labs. He says Professor Syncope isn’t too sure what the gizmo does, but he thinks it’s some kind of multi-dimensional travel component or something. ‘I dunno, you guys are the experts.’ Unless anyone has a scene they want to do before that, we’re going to start with the three of you arriving at the Labs.”

Molly: “Yeah, just one quick thing. I’d like to spend a couple of dice on finding out if there are any rumors about what the gizmo does.”

Eddie: “Sure, no problem. Difficulty is also two dice, so 6.¹ Roll ‘em.”

Molly: “OK, I got a 8. Hit me.”

Eddie: “How’d you look into it?”

Molly: “Um, I called the Tinkerbot, he’s usually good on technological weirdness.”

Eddie: “Cool. Yeah, Tinkerbot is as usual grumpy about hearing from you – he has a reputation to maintain among his villainous customers. ‘Jesus, Snapshot, I asked you to keep it to the weekends.’”

Molly: “‘Whatever, screwdriver man. You still owe me and you probably always will, so stop complaining. What do you hear about that transdimensional thingie that Professor Syncope has down at his lab?’”

¹ The difficulty for most tasks is defined in dice. Each die adds 3 to the difficulty of the task. Molly had to decide how many dice she was spending before she found out what the target number was, because her character doesn’t know how tough the task is. Usually, a player will know the difficulty before deciding how many dice to spend.

Eddie: "'Whoa, it's transdimensional? I didn't know that.'"

John: "Ooops."

Molly: "Shaddup. 'Um, yeah. Our relationship is built on mutual sharing of information, right? Anyhow, what do you know about it?'"

Eddie: "He snickers. 'Well, I know it's got something to do with dimensions now, but I already knew that Electric Yellow and his gang badly want to get their hands on it. They've been beating the bushes trying to figure out where it is all week. I won't tell them that old Syncope has it, but I'm pretty sure they already know.'"

Molly: "'Great – that's exactly what I wanted to know. You're a prince.'"

John: "Hey, Eddie, I want to cement a plot point.² What's the difficulty for making Electric Yellow be from another dimension? If you weren't going that way already."

Eddie: "I was not; I had something else in mind. But that's a pretty likely change, although it'll make me think on my feet a bit. Electric's a major NPC, so we'll say it's 3 dice for a target of 9."

Molly: "You can do that?"

Hunter: "You care enough to do that?"

John: "I read the rules; they were short. I'm not going to put dice into it, though; it's not worth three dice. I was thinking more like two."

Eddie: "Sorry about that. OK, absent objections I'm going to frame to the next scene now."

² You can spend dice to mess around with the plot, or with NPCs, or what have you. This is optional, but lazy GMs may find it useful to allow their players to do the hard thinking for them.

Scene 2

Eddie: "Right. All three of you are down at the Paranormal Research Labs. As always, the labs are alive with the sound of worried grad students and very large Tesla coils. Professor Syncope is fretting in the background, mostly at Titanium. 'Are you sure you can protect the device? I have a terrible feeling...'"

Hunter: "Yah, whatever. Any bad guys around?"

Eddie: "Not that you see right now."

Molly: "Unless you count the terrible danger of an absent-minded Professor Syncope."

John: "I'll calm him down a little. 'Professor, you know you don't need to worry when the Moderns are on the scene. We've done some research, we think we know what's going on – you have nothing to worry about. You might want to get out of the lab for a little while, though.'"

Eddie: "'I can't possibly! I have a very important experiment to manage. You three may have to stay here for a while.'"

John: "'Whatever it takes, Professor.' I'm going to head out of the lab to fly up a little way, using my force fields as invisible legs, and see if I can see anyone coming."

Eddie: "OK. You two?"

Molly: "Um, I'll do a mental scan for disguised thugs or villains or whatever. It'd be easy to sneak in here."

Hunter: "I'll extend my buzzsaw claws. Just in case. And I keep my eyes out for bad guys, the way I was trained to do."

Eddie: "Right. Let's see. John, you get some altitude and look around. That's really a normal kind of a thing to do, so you get two dice free –"

John: "Nope, I'm flying. You should charge me, but I should also get the benefit of being higher up. I want to put three dice into this."

Eddie: "Fair enough. It's a two dice task."

John: "Total is 10, on a 6, a 1, and a 3. I'm only down 2 dice."³

Eddie: "Yep, and you make the roll. OK, then, what you see is a lot of normalcy except there's one van parked not too far from the lab that is odd. It's painted like a school van, in green and white, except for the roof, which is black. As if someone had repainted it hastily. Also, there's a little antenna on top. Molly, how many dice are you putting into the scan?"

Molly: "I guess – let's say four. Uh, total of 17!"

Eddie: "Very nice. The difficulty was five dice, so you needed a decent roll. Take one die back for the 1 you rolled. You sort of filter around a little and at first, no, there's nothing – but then it becomes evident that there's a mental shield somewhere and that's why you didn't find anything at first. You're good enough to get past the shield and identify the four thugs pretending to be grad students."

Hunter: "I whack 'em!"

Molly: "You don't know yet! 'Hey, Buzzsaw, those guys! They're Electric Yellow's goons!' Now you know. Um, that was mental, not out loud."

John: "I head down to let the other guys know that we may have company."

Eddie: "Great. OK, let's have a fight! These guys are thugs, generic five dicers for a total of twenty dice. Buzzsaw and Snapshot are going to

get a free shot at them since Snapshot read their minds. Do it up, guys. John, Titanium will get in on the next exchange."

Hunter: "Awesome. I'm gonna rip into the first one... four dice worth."

John: "It's Really Quite Angry Man!"

Molly: "Hush. I'm going to mentally blast them with a flashback to wartime. It'll be all visions of horror and gunfire and so on. Two dice."

Eddie: "Roll away."

Hunter: "Crap, 10. Well, still, I rip into them brutally, buzzsaws whirring and chewing away. There's gonna be blood on the Professor's equipment."

Molly: "8!"

Eddie: "OK, that's a not so bad 18, for six 3s. I see a couple of 1s there; don't forget to take those dice back, Hunter. You rip into them. Blood flies. One of them staggers back from Buzzsaw's deadly blades, then falls to Snapshot's dark mental visions. John arrives just in time to see the carnage. Professor Syncope is cowering under a lab bench."

Hunter: "And there's a little spot of blood on his lab coat."

John: "I'm going to hang back and let Buzzsaw finish these guys off. 'It'll be over before I can tell the Professor it's under control!'"

Hunter: "I'll finish them off. Three guys, so I'll put five dice into it. I advance on them growling. 'You messed with the wrong superhero, punks!'"

Molly: "Yeah, I'll hang back too."

Eddie: "Hm, they have 15 dice total. As Buzzsaw advances, two of them form a little line to hold him off while the other one dives for Professor Synapse with a knife. That'll be simultaneous, four dice and two dice respectively. Anyone want to modify their actions?"

³ When you roll a 1 on a die, that die goes back in your pool. Superheroics are not about failure.

Molly: "You bet. Two dice to stop him from getting to the Professor! Uh, I use telekinesis – the stress of the moment is the motivation I need to extend my mental powers."

Eddie: "Didn't you spend half an hour last session explaining to that nice reporter you're dating that you couldn't use telekinesis and it made you sad because you couldn't ever fly?"

Molly: "Um. Yeah. OK, sorry, dark visions which ravage his brain."

Hunter: "11. These dice suck. Two 1s."

Eddie: "So they do. Four thug dice means, uh, 12 – just enough to beat Buzzsaw. These guys are clearly the elite members of the force; they have steel plates under their jacket and they use them to block the buzzsaws and pummel Buzzsaw himself. Hunter, shed a die.⁴ Molly?"

Molly: "7, so I beat his 6 and my dark visions make him think that Professor Synapse is actually a zombie soldier ready to eat his brain."

Eddie: "He fails to take the Professor hostage and he's down another die. They're at eight dice. Next cycle – what are you guys doing?"

Hunter: "Damn it. Um..."

John: "I do a swooping flyby on those first two, for four dice. If I hit I'm going to knock them back into Buzzsaw."

Hunter: "Right, OK, I throw in four dice to cut them up as Titanium pushes them into me. Buzzzz!"

Molly: "My turn to hang."

⁴ The thugs don't beat Buzzsaw's roll by 3, but there's a minimum damage rule, so he still takes a hit.

Eddie: "They're pulling back and getting into a defensive formation, back to back to back. They'll put five dice into this, saving their last dies for – well, for something, maybe you'll find out. Roll 'em."

John: "I roll a 13, Hunter has an 18, 31 total blows away their 15."

Eddie: "And in fact it finishes them off. Nicely done and just in time: Electric Yellow stalks through the door, eyes lit up with lightning-blue sparks. 'You interfere with me again? You idiots; if you'd just let me have the device, I could go somewhere else and bother you no more!'"

Molly: "Ooooh, big man. 'We don't care if you bother us, Banana Boy – we care if you bother other people, and I don't think you were planning on going to a desert island. Put up your fists!'"

Pause

Let's review the dice spent so far, just for reference. This could have been written into the example of play, but that dialogue would have stretched suspension of disbelief too far.

Scene One:

Molly spent two dice checking out the rumors.

Scene Two:

Pre-Combat:

John spent three dice searching for thugs, and got one back.

Molly spent four dice mind scanning, and got one back.

Exchange One:

Hunter spent four dice fighting, and got two back.

Molly spent two dice fighting.

Exchange Two:

Hunter spent five dice fighting, and got two back.

Molly spent two dice fighting.

Exchange Three:

John spent four dice fighting.

Hunter spent four dice fighting.

Molly's spent ten dice but got only one die back. Hunter's spent thirteen dice and gotten four back. John's spent seven dice, and gotten one back. He's thrifty.

Scene Three

Eddie: "Electric Yellow snickers nastily, and says, 'If you insist, my beautiful detective. If you insist.' Let's get started."

John: "Wait – plot point. Last time we met him he was trying to kill Snapshot. I want him to be motivated by jealousy, and I want him to think that she and Titanium are dating, so that he comes after me this time."

Molly: "Can't say I mind."

Eddie: "Huh, OK. Well, that'd be five dice. Target number of 15."

John: "I'll put six dice into it, and... I get a 20, no problem."

Eddie: "OK. He pauses a moment, and then says, 'But first I'm going to rid myself of your beau!'"

Hunter: "I'm going to whack him. Six dice worth of buzzsaw. Hey, I redid my saws a little – they're going to fly out of my wrists like boomerangs now."

Eddie: "Sure, OK, that's within possibility."

John: "'Hey, Banana Boy... or should I say Baby Banana... if you're so upset why don't you come over here and do something about it?' And I'm going to slam up a big force barrier when he comes at me, and wrap it around him. Let's say six dice."

Molly: "Ah, clever. OK, I'm going to fuzz his mind something fierce so he's more likely to fall for Titanium's ploy. Also six dice."

Eddie: "Nifty. OK, sure, I'll buy this. But you have to beat him by more than... say three, because Buzzsaw's doing his own thing. So the first

three points you beat him by go to damage, and if you get anything over that you can tie him up for the next exchange. He's rolling a big 20 dice out of his pool of 60."

John: "Fair enough. I get... 20."

Molly: "I get 21."

Hunter: "You guys are punks. I get 27."

Eddie: "He has a 67, so you beat him but only by one. Lucky rolls. OK, Electric Yellow comes at Titanium like a madman, almost frothing in rage, his hair standing up with static. Snapshot's got her hooks in him something fierce. But just when he's about to stumble into the trap, Buzzsaw's buzzsaw cuts into his body, and the pain snaps him out of it. He looks over at Titanium, and smiles slowly. Oh, and he loses another die, putting him down to 39. Next exchange..."

And that's where we'll leave our heroes. Buzzsaw, Snapshot, and Titanium do manage to beat off Electric Yellow, but he gets away with the device after spending a ridiculous 25 dice on grabbing it and fleeing. On the bright side, since he was getting away rather than fighting, the Moderns didn't lose any more dice from their pools.

Next, we'll explain the rules and where all those numbers came from.

we do not stop playing

“We do not stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing.”

This chapter covers the basic *Above The Earth* rules. GMs and players alike will want to read it. The next chapter is intended for GMs who want to run the game, but there aren't any secrets there or anything; it's just a convenient dividing line. Most of the important stuff for player and GM alike is in this section.

We'll start with the basics, then work through using powers and combat, and finish up with some twists.

The Dice

Ideally, you'd play with three of those little containers of six sided dice in front of each player. You probably know the ones; they're blocks of dice four by three by three dice large, which is a grand total of 36 dice. Get three of those together and throw out eight dice off the top and you've got a perfect setup. At eight bucks a box, though, that might be a little pricy.

Either way, though, every player starts out every session with a hundred dice. It doesn't matter if you ended on a cliffhanger or if you had a handful of dice left last session. You start out with a hundred dice, and they need to last you until the end of the session.

The dice represent the total amount of things your character can do during a session. Every time your character does something super-heroic, you need to spend some of your dice. Superheroic doesn't mean superhuman; Batman's doing superheroic things and he doesn't have any special powers. It means the kinds of things that separate superheroes from ordinary people.

The dice also represent how much your character can get beat up. If your character gets beat up a lot, he or she won't be able to do as many things. Think of it this way: fights take a lot out of you.

Doing Things

When you want your character to use a superpower or otherwise perform superheroically, you need to put some dice on the table. This represents the effort your character is putting into the action. Two dice is a token effort; fifteen dice is a lot of effort; fifty dice is Superman pushing the Moon around.

Before you decide how many dice to spend, though, the GM picks a difficulty as he or she sees fit. This difficulty is expressed in terms of dice and your target number is the difficulty times three. In other words, if the difficulty for an action is four dice, then your target number is twelve. You need to roll the target number or above with the number of dice you decide to spend on the action. You can change your mind at any point up until you decide how many dice to spend.

After you roll, you can pick up any dice that rolled a 1 and put them back in your pool. If you had 50 dice and rolled 5 of them, and two of them came up 1s, you would wind up with 47 dice in your pool. Getting low rolls is unpleasant, but this rule makes it feel a little bit better.

Failing to beat the target number does not have any effect on your dice pool, other than losing the dice you spent.

Most of the time, the GM chooses the difficulty before you roll the dice. However, if the GM thinks that your character shouldn't know how tough the action is, you're going to have to make up your mind first. Note that this means you can't back out on this kind of action after you find out how difficult it is.

However, you can add dice to your roll after you make your initial roll. This costs two dice for every one die you add, so there's a price, but you can still pull victory out of your hat if you really want to. This works whether or not the GM chose the difficulty in advance or not.

You can decide to describe the exact nature of your character's action pretty much whenever you like. If you look back at the example of play, you'll see that Molly described how she was trying to get information on Professor Synapse's widget after she knew she'd succeed. This is a way to give the player a little more control. Molly might not have wanted to use Tinkerbot if she knew she was going to fail, and that's perfectly OK. On the other hand, if she'd wanted to give up that element of control and let the dice determine how friendly Tinkerbot was that day, that would have been OK as well.

Non-Superheroic Things

Sometimes you're going to want to do things that aren't superheroic. Let's say you're playing a big dumb brawler and you want to search a supervillain's lair. You don't have any particularly search-oriented superpowers.

You get two free dice for this kind of action. However, you can't pull more dice from your pool – you just get to roll the two free dice. This may make your chances of success fairly low, but that's the penalty for not having appropriate powers.

You can still add dice to your roll after your initial roll, though, and as usual it costs two dice per die you add. This helps keep someone with no powers overshadowing someone who has powers that apply; you can out-search the master detective, but you're going to severely limit your ability to do other things that session.

Doing Things That Hurt

The rules for doing things that put your character in direct conflict with other characters are more or less the same as the rules for doing simple things, except for setting difficulties and consequences. Most of the examples we're going to use involve combat, because let's be honest with ourselves: this is a superhero game, not a game of delicate diplomatic negotiations. However, if you find yourself involved in a social conflict, you should still be using these rules.

Conflicts take place in exchanges. During each exchange, you and the GM decide how many dice you're going to commit to the exchange and describe what everyone is trying to do. This can be a back and forth process, continuing until everyone's happy with the setup. Actions are simultaneous, and there is no initiative.

Fighting Thugs

Thugs are the faceless minions that go down like ninepins when determined heroes are around. Generally, thugs don't have any superheroic abilities, although if the GM needs some supervillains who are fairly unthreatening, he could make them thugs.

Thugs are rated in dice, much like any other obstacle. A typical thug is about five dice. A group of thugs adds all their dice together and should be treated as a single opponent, rather than several separate opponents. This helps make them credible and speeds up combat.

After the setup phase of an exchange, you roll your dice. The GM's total is the number of dice the thugs spent times three, just like a normal roll. The higher total wins.

The next step is usually damage. Assuming it's a straightforward combat, the winning character does one die worth of damage for every full three points he or she beat the loser's roll by. The minimum damage is one die, so even if you only beat the thugs by two points, your character will still do a die of damage to them. If you beat them by five points, it's still a die of damage; if you beat them by seven points, two dice; and so on.

Fighting Villains

Fighting villains is exactly like fighting thugs, except that villains get to roll their dice instead of just taking the default. Also, villains have more dice to throw around. Since a villain's performance is far more unpredictable, they are more dangerous opponents. A typical villain has between 50 to 100 dice.

Villains do not get to put dice that roll 1s back into their dice pools.

Splitting Actions

You can do more than one thing at once, as can your opponents. Just decide how many dice you want to use on each thing. There is no penalty associated with this.

More Than Fisticuffs

If the opponents weren't just trying to beat each other up, the winner simply succeeds at whatever he or she was trying to do. This could be escaping, could be grabbing the valuable painting, could be convincing an NPC to join one side or another – whatever. The loser does not take any damage, no matter how much they were beaten by.

The exact effects of a loss are up to the GM. In the example of play, we saw the heroes trying to immobilize a villain, which would have given them a free exchange of attacks on him had they succeeded. The GM could also have ruled that a success would have permitted Electric Yellow to defend himself, but he'd have been unable to cause any damage to the heroes.

The End

When one of the combatants drops to zero dice, he or she is out of the combat. What exactly that means is up to the GM. Usually, it means they're tied up or otherwise incapable of fighting, ready to be dragged off to jail or to a supervillain's base. It could mean they escaped, but the GM needs to be very careful about escaping villains so as to avoid frustrating the players.

Direct Conflict?

Hey, what's this direct conflict stuff? What does direct mean, anyhow?

It's a phrase deliberately chosen to be somewhat ambiguous. Our preference is to use simple rolls for conflicts that don't involve face-to-face activity. For example, let's say that the master thief Felissima is engaged in a dogged attempt to hide his lair from the superhero Voiceover. You could do this as an extended conflict, but by default

Voiceover's player would choose a number of dice and the GM would choose a difficulty and Voiceover would either succeed or fail.

To decide if you've got an exception to this rule, ask yourself if you'd want to read a comic in which most of the pages were dedicated to the conflict at hand. If the answer is yes, then you probably want to resolve it as a direct conflict. The important thing is maintaining the feeling of two people in active conflict.

Caps

During a single scene, players can use no more than 50 dice. If they use up their subpool, they have been defeated, even if there are dice left in the pool. Dice that roll 1s can be reused in that scene.

Powers

We haven't said much so far about powers or character sheets or anything like that. That's because there aren't any rules for what powers your character can have and there are no character sheets. Your character can have whatever powers you like, as long as everyone in the game accepts them. Your character can develop new powers in the middle of the game. Your character can do whatever you imagine.

That said, it's bad form to whip out whatever power happens to be useful at the moment. To draw a questionable metaphor, you can imagine a sardine butterscotch sundae, but that doesn't mean it's a good idea. Deciding that your powered armor character can suddenly read minds is possible, but it's not all that polite.

It's also impolite to step too hard on another player's niche. This is true both for character creation and actual play. Going back to our example of play, Molly would have every right to object if Hunter started giving Buzzsaw super detective powers out of the blue.

Plot Points

Above The Earth players can use their dice to directly manipulate the game's reality. The GM always has veto power on such attempts.

If you want to change an NPC motivation, an upcoming event, or some other such plot point, you first tell the GM what you would like to change. The GM then decides what the difficulty is going to be, just as for any other attempt to take an action. You decide how many dice you're going to spend, roll them, and hope for success. You may also change your mind after the GM tells you how hard it's going to be.

The difficulty will always be at least one die. If you're messing with an NPC who's shown up more than once or twice, that adds a die. A major NPC adds two or three dice.

If you're trying to change the world in a way that helps you out, that adds two dice.

If you're changing the world in a way that will make the GM's life more difficult – maybe you're changing something that was crucial to the scenario – then that adds at least two dice.

The total difficulty is always up to the GM, who is welcome to tweak these numbers as he or she sees fit.

behind the curtain

“Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.”

This chapter covers things you might want to know if you’re a GM. It’s not very long. There aren’t any secrets here; mostly this is where we talk a little about why the numbers are what they are, and what the consequences of the rules are. There’s also some advice for setting difficulties and so on.

Rule of Threes

We use three as the multiplier for target numbers in order to make life a little easier for the players. The average roll on one die is 3.5, so a player will usually beat the target number whenever he or she rolls as many dice as the difficulty. The idea is to make success likely but not guaranteed, which is the tone we want for this particular game.

When figuring damage, we also use three as the key number. This doesn’t create any particular bonus for the PCs, since the villains get the same advantage here. Using three means that the key number is the same throughout the game, though, and it makes combats shorter than they’d be if four were the key number for damage.

Beefy Villains

That said, one trick you can play to make villains scarier is changing the damage divisor for a particularly damage resistant villain. If a villain takes one die of damage for every four points the players beat his roll by, he’s going to be a good deal more difficult to take down. When using this trick, don’t use the minimum damage rule, or the players will be able to nickel and dime the villain down.

Complicated Fights

Some of the time, you’ll be able to add all the player totals together and all of the villain totals together and come up with two numbers to compare. Sometimes, some thugs will split off and do something else and some heroes will go to stop them and you’ll just have two different conflicts to resolve. Still no problem.

Sometimes, though, one villain will be fighting two heroes with very different ideas of what to do. In the example of play, Buzzsaw was trying to hurt Electric Yellow while Snapshot and Titanium were trying to entangle him.

The exact effects of this are up to the GM. The best tool for resolving these actions is thresholds of victory. The most basic action is the most likely to succeed, and if the heroes beat the villain by more than a certain threshold, the other actions can succeed as well. Buzzsaw’s damage was the most basic action, while Snapshot and Titanium’s plan was a little more complex and thus less likely to succeed – although not much less likely, since more dice were spent on it.

Bleeding Dice

On average, a player will have around 120 dice to spend during the course of a session. They’ll get 17 or 18 dice back from their initial 100 rolls, and they’ll get three or so dice back from those 17.

This makes it very easy for you, as a GM, to balance the opposition. You want to bleed the players down to nearly zero dice by the time the session ends. You also want to leave them around a fifth of their dice for investigation, searches, and the like. This means that you should allocate around 95 dice per player to villains and thugs and other set challenges.

The total number of dice in any individual scene is a measure of how important the scene is. Let’s say you have four players and five scenes planned for the session. You want to make the first four scenes about equally important while the last one should be the big climax.

The players have a total of 480 dice to spend during the session. You decide to allocate 100 dice per player to conflicts and preplanned challenges. You put 150 dice into the last scene, leaving 250 dice for the other four scenes; each of those scenes will be between 60 to 65 dice.

Non-Combat Stuff

The more dice players spend on things that aren't direct conflict, the fewer dice they'll have for the fights. That tends to encourage them to avoid spending dice on anything but fights. In order to keep the game from devolving into a straightforward slugfest, make sure that you provide advantages when player characters succeed outside of combat.

Giving them a round of surprise is a good direct way to do this. You can also reduce a villain's die pool as the result of good legwork on the part of the player characters. Tell the players when you do this, so that they know they've had an effect.

Power Levels

Above The Earth doesn't dictate any particular power level. Superman has the same 100 dice as Batman. This is as it is in the comic book, where Spider-Man breaks bread with the Avengers and nobody blinks an eye.

If you really want to highlight differences in character power, you can do it with caps. Set the street-smart detective's per-scene cap at 30 dice, and the superhuman alien's per-scene cap at 50 or 60 dice, and you've got different power levels in action. It will, however, be somewhat discouraging for the detective if this happens all the time.

It's probably better to let the heroes fight side by side on even terms, and denote power levels by your descriptions of their opponents. Here's the tricky concept: Zorbo the Galactic Destroyer and Mel the Local Crimelord are both 75 dice villains. The difference between them is the scope of their plans and the description of their actions. Zorbo sends out high-tech power armor suits driven by the force of his

amazing will, and Mel sends out cheap thugs, but both the suits and the thugs have five dice apiece.

Advancement

There are no advancement rules; advancement should be handled just like power levels. As a campaign goes on, the quality of a character's opponents can increase. Note that this doesn't have to happen; most superheroes fight villains at the same power level for most of their careers. However, it's one way to provide a feeling of progression.

The other method of progressing is, of course, in the hands of the player: developing new powers. Players are free to develop new powers as they see fit, with the caveat – and we know players are reading this section too, as well they should – that moving too quickly is only robbing yourself of fun. New powers are a way for characters and personality to develop, not a way to become more powerful.

crossfire hurricane

"I was born in a crossfire hurricane..."

Above The Earth is a superhero roleplaying game written in 24 hours, beginning on July 24th, 2004 at 1 PM and concluding on July 25th, 2004 at the same time. The genesis of the game was a conversation I had several weeks earlier, during which I said casually, "OK, we'll play minimalist *Champions*. You have 100 six siders; when you run out, you run out."

I then promptly shoved the idea back into a mental corner, because I knew there was a 24 Hour RPG in it somewhere, and I didn't want to develop it any further before I got started writing. And now: here I am.

The game is basically a resource management game with a significant debt owed to *The Marvel Universe RPG* and various card-based role-playing games. I love *Champions* with an all-abiding passion, but I am on occasion frustrated by the difficulty of simulating the power flexibility we see in the comic books. I like the idea of using *Everway* for a superhero game (see http://www.wolfram.demon.co.uk/rp_ew_mh_top.html), but I also like dice. These competing desires were my main impetus to design *Above The Earth*.

Most of the actual design grew out of the example of play that opens the rules. I had the one-liner rules concept, and writing down a typical game session helped me figure out where the rules needed clarifications, exceptions, and elaborations. This is a direct steal from a guy named Roy at the Forge, who describes his technique here: <http://indie-rpgs.com/viewtopic.php?t=1896>. It made it amazingly simple to get this game finished in 24 hours.

Colophon

The title typeface is Andiron Outline, designed by Nick Curtis. Find more of his great typefaces at <http://www.nicksfonts.com/>, or grab Andiron Outline at http://www.fontfreak.com/authors/nick_curtis.htm. The text typeface is Optima, which comes free with a Macintosh like the one I wrote this on. My word processor is Microsoft Word. I would have used Adobe InDesign for layout but the Apple Store was out of upgrades yesterday.

The first chunk of this game, which is to say the example of play, was written to the music of the various and sundry Boston alternative bands in which Tanya Donnelly, Kim and Kelley Deal, and Kristen Hersh played. Beauty is in the fuzztone. At some point during the second chapter I swapped over to X.

In the morning, I finished up the game to the dulcet tones of Kate Bush, followed by some Jesus and Mary Chain. It becomes fairly obvious when I was a teenager, doesn't it?

How To Print

This PDF is designed to be both fairly readable on screen and easily printable. If I were going to print this sucker out, I'd print it just as it's laid out, with two pages per sheet. Then I'd fold each page in half, printed side out. Then I'd stack all the pages up in a pile and staple them together down the spine. You could print the cover page out on heavier cardstock, cut it in half, and use the blank half as the back cover if you wanted. Use tape down the spine to hide the staples.

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